

# BBC VARIETY PROGRAMMES POLICY GUIDE FOR WRITERS AND PRODUCERS

## **PREFACE**

This booklet is for the guidance of producers and writers of light entertainment programmes. It seeks to set out the BBC's general policy towards this type of material, to list the principal 'taboos', to indicate traps for the unwary or inexperienced, and to summarise the main guidance so far issued of more than a short-term application. It is however no more than a guide, inevitably incomplete and subject of course to supplementation. It cannot replace the need of each producer to exercise continued vigilance in matters of taste.

## **GENERAL**

The BBC's attitude towards its entertainment programs is largely governed by the fact that broadcasting is a part of the domestic life of the nation. It caters in their own homes for people of all ages, classes, trades and occupations, political opinions and religious

beliefs. In that respect it has no parallel among other media of entertainment and the argument, frequently advanced, that the BBC should be ready to broadcast material passed for public performance on the stage or screen is not valid. The Corporation must have its own standards moulded in the light of its own circumstances. The influence that it can exert upon its listeners is immense and the responsibility for a high standard of taste correspondingly heavy. Its aim is for its programmes to entertain without giving reasonable offence to any part of its diversified audience. It must therefore keep its programmes free from vulgarity, political bias, and matter in questionable taste. The claims of sectional interests to special consideration need constantly to be weighed but at the same time the BBC must not be at the mercy of the cranks. On more or less controversial issues the Corporation confines itself to what it regards as fair comment in the context. On matters of taste it has to set itself a standard that will be accepted by most rational people.

These are the principal factors influencing

BBC policy. The responsibility for enforcing it, since in normal times there are no official censors, is very largely vested in the producers themselves and it is therefore of paramount importance that they should be aware both of the Corporation's general attitude towards the subject and of the detailed rules which have been drawn up during some 25 years' practical experience.

Producers are not asked to be narrow-minded in their approach to the problem but they are required to recognise its importance and to err, if at all, on the side of caution. Material about which a producer has any doubts should, if it cannot be submitted to someone in higher authority, be deleted, and an artist's assurance that it has been previously broadcast is no justification for repeating it. 'When in doubt, take it out' is the wisest maxim.

#### **VULGARITY**

Programmes must at all cost be kept free of crudities, coarseness and innuendo. Humour must be clean and untainted directly or by

association with vulgarity and suggestiveness. Music hall, stage, and to a lesser degree, screen standards, are not suitable to broadcasting. Producers, artists and writers must recognise this fact and the strictest watch must be kept. There can be no compromise with doubtful material. It must be cut.

*A. General.* Well known vulgar jokes (e.g. the Brass Monkey) ‘cleaned up’, are not normally admissible since the humour in such cases is almost invariably evident only if the vulgar version is known.

There is an absolute ban upon the following:—

Jokes about —

Lavatories

Effeminacy in men

Immorality of any kind.

Suggestive references to —

Honeymoon couples

Chambermaids

Fig leaves

Prostitution

Ladies’ underwear, e.g. winter draws on

Animal habits, e.g. rabbits  
Lodgers  
Commercial travellers.

Extreme care should be taken in dealing with references to or jokes about –

Pre-natal influences (e.g. ‘His mother  
was frightened by a donkey’)  
Marital infidelity.

Good taste and decency are the obvious governing considerations. The vulgar use of such words as ‘basket’ must also be avoided.

*B. Sophisticated Revue and Cabaret.* A great deal of the material performed elsewhere in these types of entertainment is just not suitable to be broadcast. There can perhaps be a little more latitude in the editing of ‘sophisticated’ programmes which are billed and generally identified as such but not sufficiently for them to reflect all the accepted characteristics of this kind of show. The fact is that radio revue and cabaret must be tailored to the microphone in much the same way as other programmes and deny itself many items technically suitable

which do not conform to established BBC standards.

#### ADVERTISING

Advertising of any sort is not normally allowed and gratuitous publicity for any commercial undertaking or product may not be given. Occasionally, however, such references may be unavoidable where, for instance, a commercial firm is sponsoring a public event, e.g. the *Star* Dancing Championships, the *Melody Maker* Dance Band Contest. In such cases mention of the sponsoring body must not go beyond the proper courtesy and essential programme interest.

Otherwise mention of all firms, trade and proprietary names is barred.

N.B. The following trade names are now regarded as generic terms:—

Aspirin	Pianola
Bakelite	Spam
Cellophane	Tabloid
Gramophone	Thermos
Luminal	Vaseline
Nylon	Zip.

The inclusion of any of these is therefore permitted in scripts but derogatory references to them must be avoided as constituting a form of ‘trade slander’.

#### AMERICAN MATERIAL AND ‘AMERICANISMS’

Various fairly obvious factors, such as American films and the fact that much modern popular music originates in America, tend to exert a transatlantic influence upon our programmes. American idiom and slang, for instance, frequently find their way quite inappropriately into scripts, and dance band singers for the most part elect to adopt pseudo American accents. The BBC believes that this spurious Americanisation of programmes – whether in the writing or in the interpretation – is unwelcome to the great majority of listeners and, incidentally, is seldom complimentary to the Americans.

There is and always will be a place in programmes for authentic American artistes and material but the BBC’s primary job in light entertainment must be to purvey programmes in our own native idiom, dialects

and accents. The ‘Americanisation’ of British scripts, acts and performances is therefore most actively to be discouraged.

#### **LIBEL AND SLANDER**

Actionable references in Variety Programmes have been few since broadcasting began. Producers must, however, take all possible steps to ensure that defamatory material is not included in scripts. The three most likely forms for it to take are:

- (a) an uncomplimentary gag by one artist about a fellow artist or other person.
- (b) impersonations which may be taken as derogatory.
- (c) the use in a fictional setting of a character identifiable with a living person (particularly, of course, if the character is ‘bad’).

Considerations of taste are usually a safeguard against (a) and (b), though the possibility of defamation makes caution on the producer’s part more than ever necessary. Against (c)



there can be no complete safeguard, but producers and writers must be scrupulously careful to see that characters in plays and sketches are not given names of living people whose circumstances are remotely similar to those in the fictional plot. In the case of titled people reference books must be consulted. In other cases all reasonable checks that are possible must be made.

#### **BIBLICAL REFERENCES**

This is by no means always easy, so many biblical phrases having long since passed into the language and being therefore for the most part admissible in any context. The criterion should, generally speaking, be whether a phrase or saying is still largely identified with the Bible. In that case it should not be used in a comedy setting – though it may still be quite suitable in programmes of a more serious character.

Sayings of Christ or descriptive of Him are, of course, inadmissible for light entertainment programmes.

Jokes built around Bible stories, e.g. Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, David and Goliath, must also be avoided or any sort of parody of them. References to a few biblical characters e.g. Noah, are sometimes permissible but, since there is seldom anything to be gained by them and since they can engender much resentment they are best avoided altogether.

#### **RELIGIOUS REFERENCES**

Reference to and jokes about different religious or religious denominations are banned. The following are also inadmissible:—

Jokes about A.D. or B.C. (e.g. ‘before Crosby’)

Jokes or comic songs about spiritualism, christenings, religious ceremonies of any description (e.g. weddings, funerals)

Parodies of Christmas carols

Offensive references to Jews (or any other religious sects).

#### **POLITICAL REFERENCES**

No precise general directive can be given since each individual case needs to be

considered on its merits and the performer, the manner of delivery, and the context all need to be taken into account. General guidance is however given in the following quotation from a directive issued on 2nd July, 1948:

‘We are not prepared in deference to protests from one Party or another to deny ourselves legitimate topical references to political figures and affairs, which traditionally have been a source of comedians’ material. We therefore reserve the right for Variety programmes in moderation to take a crack at the Government of the day and the Opposition so long as they do so sensibly, without undue acidity, and above all funnily.

‘Generally speaking, political issues should not be made the running theme of any light entertainment programme or item, and references should be no more than incidental. Occasionally, of course, a sketch or comedy sequence based on, e.g. the National Health Service, is permissible.

‘We must guard against the over-exploitation of songs with a political theme. Usually these

are MS numbers sung by comedians and are legitimate enough for one or two performances when strictly topical, but undesirable if “plugged” in many programmes.

‘We must bar altogether:

- (a) anything which we adjudge to go beyond fair comment in this sort of context on a matter of general topical interest;
- (b) anything that can be construed as personal abuse of Ministers, Party Leaders, or M.P’s, malicious references to them or references in bad taste;
- (c) anything which can reasonably be construed as derogatory to political institutions, Acts of Parliament and the Constitution generally;
- (d) anything with a Party bias.

‘To sum up, our approach to the whole subject should be good humoured, un-partisan, and in good taste.’

Members of Parliament may not be included in programmes without special permission.

This permission will not be granted, whether or not the M.P. concerned is willing, for programmes the BBC considers it unsuitable or undignified for a Member of Parliament to appear.

#### PHYSICAL AND MENTAL INFIRMITIES

Very great distress can be caused to invalids and their relatives by thoughtless jokes about any kind of physical disability. The temptation to introduce them is the greater because in the milder afflictions they often represent an easy source of comedy, but, as a matter of taste, it must be resisted. The following are therefore barred:

Jocular references to all forms of physical infirmity or disease, e.g. blindness, deafness, loss of limbs, paralysis, cancer, consumption, smallpox.

Jokes about war injuries of any description.

Jokes about the more embarrassing disabilities, e.g., bow-legs, cross-eyes, stammering (this is the most common 'gag' subject of this kind).

Jokes about any form of mental deficiency.

#### **DRINK**

References to and jokes about drink are allowed in strict moderation so long as they can really be justified on entertainment grounds. Long ‘drunk’ stories or scenes should, however, be avoided and the number of references in any one programme carefully watched. There is no objection to the use of well-known drinking songs, e.g. ‘Another Little Drink’, ‘Little Brown Jug’, in their proper contexts. Trade slogans, e.g. ‘Beer is Best’, are barred. Remarks such as ‘one for the road’ are also inadmissible on road safety grounds.

#### **EXPLETIVES**

Generally speaking the use of expletives and forceful language on the air can only be justified in a serious dramatic setting where the action of the play demands them. They have no place at all in light entertainment and all such words as God, Good God, My God, Blast, Hell, Damn, Bloody, Gorbliney,

Ruddy, etc., etc., should be deleted from scripts and innocuous expressions substituted.

#### **IMPERSONATIONS**

All impersonations need the permission of the people being impersonated and producers must reassure themselves that this has been given before allowing any to be broadcast.

Artists' repertoires of impersonations are usually restricted to:—

- (a) leading public figures and political figures;
- (b) fellow artists.

As to (a) the Corporation's policy is against broadcasting impersonations of elder statesmen, e.g. Winston Churchill, and leading political figures. Any others in this category should invariably be referred.

As to (b) there is no objection, but certain artists have notified the Corporation that no unauthorised impersonations may be broadcast. The present list is given below but should be checked from time to time with the Variety Booking Manager. A double check by

producers as to permission is advisable in these cases:—

Gracie Fields

Ethel Revnell (with or without Gracie West)

Renee Houston

Nat Mills and Bobbie

Vera Lynn

Jeanne de Casalis (Mrs. Feather)

Harry Hemsley.

Very occasionally the question arises of the *impersonation of people now dead*. There is, of course, no possible objection to the portrayal or caricature of historic figures of the remote past, but the impersonation of people who have died within living memory or whose relations may still be alive, should normally be avoided altogether.

In any event only exceptional cases will be considered and the permission of surviving relations, if any, must always be obtained.

#### **MENTION OF CHARITABLE ORGANISATIONS**

Appeals for charity are normally confined to ‘The Week’s Good Cause’. No such appeals



are allowed, save in the most exceptional circumstances, elsewhere in programmes. Veiled appeals in the form of incidental references to charitable organisations are also barred.

Special permission must therefore invariably be sought for the mention of a charity, whatever the context, in entertainment programmes.

#### **‘BRITISH’ AND ‘ENGLISH’**

The misuse of the word English where British is correct causes much needless offence to Scottish, Ulster and Welsh listeners. It is a common error but one which is easily avoided by proper care on the part of the writers and producers. At the same time we should not hesitate to use the word ‘English’ if it is the proper description.

#### **POPULAR MUSIC**

Virtually all newly published dance numbers are approved for broadcasting by the Dance Music Policy Committee before publication, and it is unnecessary to detail here policy

considerations affecting the acceptance of such material. Two matters, are, however, worth noting:

(a) British Music

It is the Corporation's policy actively to encourage British music so long as this does not lead to a lowering of accepted musical standards.

(b) Jazzing the Classics

The jazzing by dance bands of classical tunes or the borrowing and adaptation of them is normally unacceptable. Any instances of this in MS material submitted for programmes must be referred by producers to a higher authority.

**MISCELLANEOUS POINTS**

Avoid derogatory references to:–

Professions, trades, and 'classes', e.g.  
solicitors, commercial travellers, miners,  
'the working class'

Coloured races.

Avoid any jokes or references that might be taken to encourage:–

Strikes or industrial disputes

The Black Market

Spivs and drones

Avoid any references to ‘The MacGillicuddy of the Reeks’ or jokes about his name.

Do not refer to Negroes as ‘Niggers’ (‘Nigger Minstrels’ is allowed).

‘Warming up’ sequences with studio audiences before broadcasts should conform to the same standards as the programmes themselves. Sample recordings should be the subject to the same vigilance as transmissions.

#### **SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR OVERSEAS BROADCASTS**

Humour in other countries, as in our own, is limited by social, political and religious taboos, and some sources of comedy legitimate enough for this country are not acceptable abroad. The majority of overseas audiences are not Christian by religion nor white in colour. Disrespectful, let alone derogatory, references to Buddhists, Hindus, Moslems, and so on, and any references to colour may therefore cause deep offence and should be avoided altogether. It is impossible to list in detail all potentially dangerous subjects

but a few random examples are given here:

Chinese abhor the description ‘Chinamen’,  
which should not be used.

Chinese laundry jokes may be offensive.

Jokes like ‘enough to make a Maltese Cross’  
are of doubtful value.

The term *Boer* War should not be used – South  
African War is correct.

Jokes about ‘harems’ are offensive in some  
parts of the world.

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