

# The original iPlayer

Ian Hislop celebrates a new chance to rediscover the joys of *The Listener*



IT'S 20 YEARS SINCE *The Listener* closed down and there are still things about it that I miss. The cheque, obviously, since I was a regular columnist, but more the pleasure of working for a magazine that was so lively and yet took broadcasting so seriously. Right from the beginning, when *The Listener* was set up in 1929, Lord Reith declared it to be "a medium for intelligent reception of broadcast programmes by way of amplification and explanation of those features which cannot now be dealt with in the editorial columns of the *Radio Times*".

Essentially it was an extended weekly print version of all the most intellectual programmes on the BBC, a sort of old-technology version of the BBC iPlayer. It offered you the chance to read anything you had missed or anything you had really enjoyed when you first heard it. Initially this was just on BBC radio, but then it was extended to include BBC television and eventually even some ITV programmes.

By the time I became a keen reader of the magazine in the 1970s, it had added strong political and arts coverage, but the core of the publication was always the incredible range of



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broadcast talks, documentaries and features that you could find in its pages.

Of course, technology has moved on. Back then, a world where you could get hold of anything you wanted with your computer was unimaginable. In fact, in the first piece I contributed to the magazine in 1984, I notice that I utterly failed to imagine the future at all. I wrote that I doubted we were on the brink of a new golden age of computing and that I found the whole business very boring. I was much more interested in the birth of Prince Harry, the marriage of Elton John (to a woman, in those far-off days) and telling everyone that "a new television programme for which I

have been doing some writing appears very shortly. It is called *Spitting Image*."

Part of me thinks that *The Listener* would still have a role in the present day. If it was available now, you could read Melvyn Bragg's *In Our Time*, or Niall Ferguson's *Civilization: Is the West History?*, or Professor Jim Al-Khalili on the universe, or World Service correspondents on Libya or Japan, or any number of programmes that you missed or didn't quite have the time to catch, even on catch-up.

However, I have to accept that the magazine is not going to be revived. It only survived because it was subsidised by the BBC, and Mrs Thatcher was never very keen on that sort of business. She initiated the series of reviews that ultimately led to the closure of the magazine in 1991. I suspect she had also read my column about a new satirical puppet show that Conservative politicians were not going to like very much.

However, it's excellent news that the entire archive is going online and that this amazing wealth of historic material will be available to anyone. It is an incredible resource. If you aren't convinced, just look at those contributors over the years: George Orwell, EM Forster, TS Eliot... myself. On second thoughts, no wonder it closed.

*The 125,000-page Listener archive, featuring everything from the transcript of King George VI's speech at the outbreak of the Second World War to Anthony Burgess on the assassination of President Kennedy in November 1963, is available to access from this week. For details go to [gale.cengage.co.uk/thelistener](http://gale.cengage.co.uk/thelistener)*

*Ian Hislop returns in a new series of Have I Got News for You on Friday BBC1, BBC1 HD*



**SIX DECADES OF THE LISTENER**  
Tuppence bought you the very first edition in Jan 1929 (far left). Other notable cover stories were the King's speech (Sept 39, above), 25 years of BBC TV (Nov 61, right), and Norman Tebbit (June 83, second right). Far right: the last ever issue, Jan 91