

THESE ARE THE NEWS (II)

The News and Newsreel was, in many ways, the culmination of Hole's reign, a miserable, baleful era in which he ran the news department with a strange, paradoxical combination of terrifying authoritarianism and careful detachment. A good illustration of this seeming contradiction is his policy of extreme, even irrational caution in news gathering.

By Hole's fiat, every item had to have at least *two* solid sources backing it up, ostensibly because of the BBC's commitment to impartiality and accuracy. One was enough for almost every other news company on the planet, at a time when instant communication was just starting to go international. Hole insisted on verification in duplicate, surely knowing that it would be all but impossible in the vast majority of cases. His reporters were left with two options: skip stories altogether, or else surreptitiously leak them to independent news agencies like the Press Association, and then use their subsequent report as a secondary source. Either way it wasn't exactly ideal and left the BBC lagging behind by definition.

There was more to this, however, than just a bad policy based on an overabundance of caution and fealty to the BBC's impartiality principle. It involved Tahu Hole's personality, of which there is vanishingly little evidence of anyone who worked with him saying anything complimentary. He has been described, albeit posthumously, as having "*no more idea about the nature and role of news in the modern world than he had tact and consideration towards his brow-beaten employees whom he variously abused and appalled.*"[≠]

One of those employees, reporter Gerald Priestland, used his autobiography to call Hole "*a monster in every sense*"[†], but more importantly noted his tactic for self-preservation: "he took good care to make no operational decisions himself for which he might be blamed if things went wrong."[†] From various independent contemporary testimonies (from the likes of Priestland, Foreign News Editor Anthony Wigan and others) of it is highly likely that Hole knew perfectly well about his employees' surreptitious tactics to bypass or even create the "second source" which Hole insisted on and which, in almost all cases, couldn't be found.

In this light the two-sources policy makes a certain amount more sense, if not justification. As a measure to preserve the BBC's impartiality it was far too heavy-handed, a sledgehammer to crack a walnut. It certainly didn't improve the quality of the news reporting or broadcasting - if anything it had the opposite effect. However, it was successful as a surreptitious way of placing Hole's responsibility for the final product at an extra remove, so he had both less work and less of the blame when things went wrong.

Independent Television, as the umbrella term for the service had become, started on the 22nd September, 1995, in London, via Associated-Rediffusion. Their first news bulletin came at the unusual hour of 10pm. The capital's viewers were agog at the sight of the words "Independent Television News" fading not to a still image of the Palace of Westminster, or the face of Sir Anthony Eden, but a real, live, immaculately groomed Chris Chataway, saying "Good evening" straight down the lens.

Television news had been invented. Suddenly there was a human factor to the whole thing. Chataway and his colleagues - including, after a year, Barbara Mandell, a *woman* of all things - explained the world's events directly to the viewer, while maintaining eye contact. It was as if television didn't have to be a soulless, implacable screen for the authorities to loom over the general populace from, but instead could be used as a bridge for long-distance human-to-human contact.

The News and Newsreel already looked quite sad and even dated, half a barely illustrated and ultimately unknowable radio broadcast and half puff pieces shot on film too long in development for up-to-the-minute information. Compared to what ITN were now doing, it was practically cave painting. Fortunately for the Corporation, and Tahu Hole, BBC got wind of the competition's plans in time to pre-empt them, though only just, putting Richard Baker and Kenneth Kendall onscreen three weeks before ITV got started.

Nonetheless, ITN quickly did the unthinkable and overtook the BBC as the nation's news provider of choice, at least through television - and television was increasingly the central medium of the age. Not only did they have newsreaders, they had news reporters, who actually went out into the field and broadcast from it, like Richard Dimbleby during the war. They spoke to politicians - to the Prime Minister even - and actually asked them questions, real questions rather than mere prompts and feed lines. Meanwhile at the BBC, Tahu Hole received a CBE and carried on his work. The one thing this news department didn't need, apart from Hole himself, was a major international crisis to deal with.