

SHAPE OF TWO

When television first spread nationwide in the 1930s, the BBC convened a joint committee of manufacturers and dealers to promote and plan the resulting network. It was called the Television Extension Committee. The amount, scale and technical complexity of the work necessary to create BBC-2 was reflected in the fact that the Corporation reused that name. The new TEC was chaired by Kenneth Adam, but the bulk of the day-to-day running fell on the Executive Director, Leonard Miall. A former head of Television Talks - The Sky at Night, the Tonight programme and Panorama as we know it today began under his watch - he now had the carefully nonspecific title of Assistant Controller. The initial shape of BBC-2 was up to him.

He immediately warned his superiors about this “minority programming” idea of Adam’s. Not that he was opposed to it on principle or anything, but this second channel, and especially the infrastructure necessary to get it on the air, represented a significant investment in time, manpower, and especially money. This was particularly vexing given the entirely new technology it was built upon, and the simultaneous impossibility of immediately abandoning the old standard. Miall used an elaborate train-based metaphor in his first memo in the new job:

“It is rather like being asked to build a second set of railways in this country, which will gradually meet up with all the existing railway stations, but the tracks must be of a different gauge...and moreover, we must continue running the old system on the old gauge for a number of years to come, though some of the trains and carriages will need to be capable of travelling along either gauge of track.” 

As noted, a significant investment, and one that would still be being paid for a long while after the channel went on-air. And not just for the Corporation themselves, but for the viewers, who were going to at least need to upgrade their aerials, if not the sets themselves as well, in order to see this high-definition programming in half as many lines again. This, Miall argued, precluded any notion of BBC-2 as a pure “minority” channel - in the sense Adam had meant, which would have been a Third Programme with pictures.

People weren’t going to go to all the trouble of installing new aerials, or even new sets, for the sake of a station showing nothing but men in suits discussing Picasso, jazz fusion and Jacques Derrida. Neither would they do so for a minority channel in a more literal sense, whose programmes were exclusively aimed only at a small sector of the population. Nor for adult education, and certainly not for repeats from BBC-1. The consumers would be bored at best, actively resentful at worst, and the BBC would see little or no return on one of the hugest investments they’d ever made.

To this end, he set out his vision of how BBC-2 was going to be. And he did so in those terms: no “would”s or “should”s, only “will” - as in “BBC-2 will be of mixed popular appeal, not what the Americans call an intellectual ghetto.” It was also going to broadcast at least twenty-five hours’ worth of original programming, rising to thirty after a year on air, which meant the largest television production unit in the world was going to have to get that bit bigger.

Market research was immediately engaged to discover how many people a) even knew about BBC-2 in the first place, b) cared and c) were prepared to go to any trouble at all to receive it, and if so how much, and if *not*, what if anything could be done to change that - what they wanted to see on BBC-2, and more to the point what they would be prepared to upgrade their equipment in order to see.

ITV looked on with envious eyes. They’d wanted to expand, and still did - sets would be manufactured with extraneous “ITV2” buttons for years just on the off-chance - and now they were seeing their main rivals - publicly funded, no less - getting the opportunity first. A spurious argument started to circulate that large ratings were bad, actually; they indicated the programming becoming worse. Greene dismissed such talk (“I have more confidence in the good people of this country than to believe that”) and insisted that the launch of BBC-2 was entirely about expanding the existing viewership, not creating new competition with ITV, or indeed within the BBC itself. Although he had to admit that if it meant that “still larger audiences” were attracted to BBC television, “we shall not be sorry”.