

DOUBLE YOUR PLEASURE

Baverstock's job title of "station controller" was a relatively new one, of course. At the start of 1964 there hadn't been "stations" to distinguish between, at least not on the BBC. The Pilkington Report, however, had looked so kindly on the BBC that it recommended changing that. The Corporation had been straining at the bit for more television space since the late Ian Jacob era, and Greene had said early in his reign that he "didn't feel we were doing our job" without, in the terminology they used at the time, a second programme.

Pilkington effectively gave them the go-ahead to plan one, which was exciting and everything, but it did mean having to deal with that most irritating of factors, practical reality. Specifically, now they had permission to launch a second station, the BBC had to decide what it would actually be like - what would be on it, what would distinguish it from the station they already have (which they were now going to have to get used to thinking of as BBC-1).

There was a template of sorts in the radio network, but Greene explicitly rejected it.

"We should not [in the sense of will not] have anything in the nature of a Home and a Light. The programmes [ie stations] would be planned together to provide reasonable alternatives." 

There were a few particularly dull Labour MPs who thought a second BBC station should be solely given over to educational programming. While Greene had nothing against the genre, he was also concerned that people should actually bother to watch the things he and his Corporation were broadcasting. This seemed unlikely with a purely scholastically minded BBC-2. More seriously, such a programme would involve so many outside factors it ran the risk of actually undermining the BBC's position as "the main instrument of broadcasting". Still, the idea of television being used for educational purposes (beyond simply broadcasting schools programmes) continued to simmer in the background, especially after Labour's return to power in 1964.

Ultimately, they settled on selling the idea of expansion in a literal sense. Director of Television Programmes Kenneth Adam laid out a sort of manifesto as part of the Corporation's evidence to Pilkington arguing that a second channel was downright necessary for the BBC to truly fulfil their charter requirements.

“In the circumstances of a single channel we cannot fulfil what the Charter lays upon us to do. We do not inform enough; we do not educate enough; the chance of experiment so that we may entertain better is very limited.” 𐀀

The second channel would, Adam argued, free the Corporation from what he called “the tyranny of timing and planning” and open the airwaves to what would soon be referred to as “minority programming”, or as Adam put it, broadcasting for “those people who are interested in the uncommon denominators - not the common ones like Dixon or Bootsie and Snudge.”

This argument is what swayed the Pilkington Committee, and once the Government (ie Macmillan's) nodded it through in 1962, the game was afoot. BBC-2 was coming - and remarkably quickly, launching inside two years despite the Engineering department being somewhat dubious at the original timetable of three. Never mind figuring out what to put on the station, simply putting anything on the air at all, in practical, technical terms, was no small task.

Yet another new transmitter had to be built at Crystal Palace, and that was just the centre of a web of twelve broadcasting stations and up to forty signal boosters. Masts would need to be manufactured that were half as tall again as the Eiffel Tower. Only two companies even existed in Britain that were capable of fulfilling this sort of order, and only four others that could subsequently install them. The BBC needed to foster as harmonious a relationship as possible with the Post Office and heavy industry in general if they wanted BBC-2 to happen at all, let alone within two years.

And that was just the signal. The BBC made it even harder for themselves by deciding that BBC-2 would broadcast exclusively on the new (to Britain) 625-line UHF system that the Pilkington Commission had got so excited about. It was bound to happen eventually; 625 was the standard in most of Europe, and while colour - which was inevitable one way or another - wasn't impossible on the BBC's usual 405, it was much easier on UHF. BBC-2 was to be the Corporation's technological pioneer, trying these new innovations until they had been perfected enough for BBC-1 to take them on.

The trouble was that this meant a lot of faffing around and irritancy on every level, from the Corporation to the technicians to, most troublingly, the consumers - none of whom could receive even a theoretical BBC-2, because 625-line televisions weren't a thing in Britain yet. There were twelve million sets in the country, and they all ran exclusively on 405 lines. To launch their second station, the BBC had to change that fact, while building vast towers across the nation.