GRAND DESIGNS

Television was coming back, and what's more, it was going national. Not just television, but exclusively BBC television, as the Hankey Commission had definitively recommended against the Corporation getting any kind of competition, commercial or otherwise, and who was Haley to argue? Ports of call for the DG, and others involved in the burgeoning industry, after the delivery of the Hankey report included EMI and the General Post Office.

The former, not yet a record label, were tasked with looking into Baird's big ideas, primarily the high definition 1000-line system. This was partly prompted by the American equivalent to the TSC, the National Television Standards Committee, choosing a 525-line system (eventually named after themselves) as the United States's analogue standard. Obviously we couldn't have the commercially-minded colonials beating us to the punch (again), and Baird had made a convincing pitch for both the thousand-line transmission and the downright science-fictional stereoscopic picture. Unfortunately, of course, he then worked himself to death in the relatively early stages, and most of the project's momentum (not to say enthusiasm) died with him. By the time EMI could demonstrate a working thousand-line system (thousand-and-one, in fact), the renewed BBC Television had already been transmitting for three years in old-fashioned 405-lines - where they would stay for the time being, because in proving a thousand lines to be possible, EMI had also proved without a shadow of a doubt that it was completely impractical.
So much for that. Regular old 405-line it was. Now the problem was getting it national. (Technically the order was to extend television to "the six most populous areas outside London", but that covered the entire country as near as dammit, and those few extraneous peninsula and rural wastelands would inevitably want it as soon as everyone else had it). The new question, therefore, was how to cover the entirety of the United Kingdom (more or less) in friendly radio waves that could carry those 405 lines to the homes of Britain.

It was all very well serving a single city, even a metropolis like London. Build a high enough tower and the radio waves will reach all the way to the edges. The prospect of building a tower high enough that the transmissions would cover the entire country, however, was a daunting one. Although not, apparently, unthinkable; the idea of a colossal, mile-high transmitter tower in North London was briefly considered, but ultimately rejected on the grounds of being both a danger to aircraft while it was up, and capable of wiping out huge swathes of the capital should it ever fall.

Another option had come up during the Hankey Committee's surveillance of America, which had even bigger problems in establishing a national network than Britain. They called their proposed solution Stratovision. This involved strapping a transmitter and an aerial to the underside of an aeroplane, or an airship maybe, that would constantly circle the city, or intended catchment area in

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general. Implausible as it might seem, a few tests of this system were carried out in the United States and it was judged to be technically feasible as a means to provide potential national coverage, but prohibitively expensive. Not only in aircraft fuel, either: a transmitter runs extremely hot - the plane's interior might have hit as much as 60 degrees Celsius on a relatively good day - and so three massive air conditioning fans also had to be strapped to and powered by the engines, lest the pilot turn into uniformed meatloaf.

Stratovision, or the basic principle thereof, would ultimately see some use throughout history as a lash-up for campus broadcasting, war propaganda and other such emergencies. It was already obvious in 1946 that it was impractical on any scale larger than that, and therefore no good for the BBC's purposes. A similar idea to repurpose the country's barrage balloons was also ruled out, largely on cost grounds (but also, possibly, because everyone was sick of seeing the useless things). Winning the war had left Britain with gumption and ambition, but also bugger-all money or resources, so there was really only one option: restart the service more or less as it was before while building new transmitter towers throughout the land to expand it as and when required. There was an economic advantage to this strategy: taking their time to create a national transmitter network would also create a gradual demand, and therefore an industry, for television sets themselves.

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