

NOT THE NINE O'CLOCK NEWS

On the 10th of May, the BBC announced that from September, they would move it to 10pm, simultaneously cancelling the current affairs magazine *At Home and Abroad*. That material would be merged into the new 10 O'Clock News, extending it into a full half-hour of solid fact: news and comment, side by side. This way, plays and the like could finish in time for the news, without interruption, curtailment or forcing the choice on listeners. Furthermore, it would make space at a useful point in the night where other major programmes could go.

Greene wasn't expecting anyone to really notice, let alone cause a stir. Certainly the Governors had shown little interest when it was brought up to them. They had reckoned without two things. Obviously they badly underestimated the public's aforementioned instinctive horror of change, but the real wildcard was a powerful and unexpected ally in one of Greene's predecessors.

It was yet another column in the *Times* that blew off the lid. Dated 12th May 1960, it described the end of the 9 O'Clock News as "like the ending of an epoch", and went on to raise even greater objections to its proposed replacement. News and "comment" combined in the same half-hour programme was then unprecedented and, to many, frankly unthinkable. The *Times* leader warned gravely that the BBC was playing a dangerous game in removing what it called "the quarantine" in which the BBC's news department operated, cut off from the rest of the Corporation, lest its subjectivity contaminate them.

As an editorial comment in *The Times*, it was unsigned - which meant it was almost certainly the work of the editor himself. Who, in 1960, was still William F. Haley, former Director-General of the BBC. As such, it's not impossible that he also knew about Greene's wider plan to merge News and Current Affairs together under a single editor, controlled by himself. If he did, he was smart enough not to mention it directly in the column - although the new format of the 10 O'Clock news did a good job of representing it in microcosm, in a way probably easier for laypeople to comprehend.

There were, however, plenty of inside-baseball references to the internal workings of the Corporation, and related troubles therein - including a "tug-of-war within the BBC between those who believe in news values and those who believe in programme values" which it darkly insinuated had been going on for a long time - since the late forties, maybe?

Most directly, the leader closed with what BBC insiders must have seen as an explicit warning from an earlier boss not to break away from his policies and undo the work he had done - "It is to be hoped that the programme officials will continue to be kept at bay where the news is concerned..."

the BBC should not set out to be all papers to all viewers and listeners.”¹¹ This echoed his comments on dismantling the War Reporting Unit rather than retooling it for peacetime - “It is no part of the BBC’s function to become another newspaper”. At that time, he’d played down the importance of news as a part of the Corporation’s remit. Now he was playing it up. In both cases it was his own vision and agenda that he was promoting.

One person who almost certainly did know about the merger was Alexander Cadogan, the former Chairman of the Board of Governors, who was among the people of influence who read the leader, were downright alarmed and made it clear to the Corporation. Cadogan wasn’t even the weightiest of those names - that was probably Dr. Geoffrey Fisher, the Archbishop of Canterbury. His involvement in particular made it clear that this issue really couldn’t be ignored as Greene wished.

A week after the column was first published, the Governors discreetly advised the Director-General to have “a word with the Editor of the Times”. Whether he did or not is unknown - which suggests that he didn’t. These were proud men. Even if he had, it’s doubtful such a meeting would have got anywhere. Greene and Haley were the two Directors-General up to that point to come from journalistic, news-heavy backgrounds, but they diverged wildly beyond that. They had very different ideas about the direction of BBC News - or more accurately, they had similar stances on news itself, but different stances on broadcasting.