TRANS-EUROPE EXPRESS

The Coronation had been the exact right event at precisely the right time for television. It cemented the box's place at the centre of home entertainment, finally and definitively knocking the wireless down to second place, never to recover. The fierce debate about whether or not the cameras should enter the Abbey at all - and lest we forget, it had required the Queen's personal intervention for that to happen - already seemed like the insane babbling of out-of-date puritans - cavemen recoiling from fire, already as relevant, and as much of a historical curiosity, "as the man with the red flag who walked before the motor-car", as the Times put it. [1]

This statement in particular held great symbolic weight. As Director-General of the BBC, William Haley had treated television with polite disinterest at best. Now the British newspaper of record, under his editorship, was all but declaring the death of history and a new broadcasting year zero. Fortunately, the Corporation now had a leader who actually liked and supported television, rather than merely accepting it as unavoidable, or outright despising it like Reith.

The rise of television was just one manifestation of the changing world, emerging from the post-war recovery period and defining itself anew. It was smaller than it used to be, with air travel becoming widespread and, of course, broadcasting becoming increasingly international. A League of Nations style early version of the present-day European Broadcasting Union had existed since 1925. It was called the International Broadcasting Union or UIR (the initialism being in French because, as was often the case, they wouldn't have joined if we didn't acknowledge that theirs was obviously the best language) and had understandably collapsed during World War II.

The BBC had made a polite Brexit from the UIR during the war as it (like the continent) became increasingly dominated by Germany. Now the war might have been over, but a lot of people were still uneasy about rejoining what they still remembered as an outright Nazi propaganda tool. And then there was the new threat from the USSR and their Iron Curtain. A lot of trust issues had to be overcome in order to get everyone, or even just a reasonable number of parties, working together again (at one point there were two competing bodies) and eventually the present-day EBU was put together in 1950.

A key negotiator, parachuted in late in the day, was Sir Ian Jacob, then controller of the BBC's European Service, who took charge so effectively that he was appointed the EBU's first chairman. By the time the Union's Programme Committee met for the first time in 1954, he was also Director-General, and therefore had to suffer the headache of organising the first Eurovision (as in the

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network - the song contest came two years later) broadcast. It was almost even harder, and almost certainly more aggravating, than the Coronation.

Early obstacles included the musicians' unions of various countries (who were mostly dealt with by simply being ignored). Then there were compatibility issues between the various standards and line numbers used across the continent - Britain still exclusively used 405 lines, most of Europe, having started later, ran with 625, and the reliably awkward French were on the downright high-definition 819. Special converters were invented, and then erected, in Paris and Breda (in the Netherlands) to take the signal on, chop it up and distribute it as necessary.

The whole venture was one of, if not the biggest risk in broadcasting to date. It involved so much new and untested technology, in service of a task that was almost beyond conception only twenty years earlier, that a whole continent could have ended up abjectly humiliated in one or more or several ways. This was, of course, tremendously exciting, with the Daily Sketch answering the question "is television trying to run before it can walk" with the wide-eyed response "yes, and why not?" ↴
In the event, there were only a couple of minor transmission issues: a momentary vision drop-out from Montreux and a touch of distortion from Rome. This was a far better result than anyone had ever hoped for, and soon the Eurovision Network was up and running and presenting the Continent with sights like the big white flower gala La Fête des Narcisses (Montreux again); a tour of the Vatican, fully endorsed (and featuring a multilingual statement from) Pope Pius XI; Danish gardening programmes; and from the BBC, footage of the Queen watching the Royal Naval Reserve marching up and down a bit.

Europe, so recently tearing itself limb from limb and with much of it still in ruins, was being brought together by broadcasting in general and television in particular. Naturally the British press was quick to place credit where it was due, ie on Britain, with the Daily Sketch modestly explaining:

"*Though the first European TV hook-up was an even greater success than the experts themselves had dared to hope, this was not really so surprising. For Britain has always led in the technical field, and this great new chapter is essentially another triumph for the BBC in the story of television's development.*" ↴

Whatever the case, Eurovision was a success, and Sir Ian Jacob and company were sufficiently emboldened to push it further. Two years after the official broadcasts, seven countries got together to sing fourteen songs and a legend was born. But that is of course another story entirely.

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