NOT THE NINE O'CLOCK NEWS (II)

Haley built the biggest and most modern news broadcasting system in the world during World War Two, and then dismantled it as soon as peace broke out and it posed a threat to the established order from which he had come, to which he eventually returned, and to which his loyalty never wavered during his eight years behind enemy lines.

Greene, on the other hand, was looking forward, seeing his predecessor as a version of King Canute who actually thought that not only would railing at the tides achieve something, but that the tides quite simply *should* go back, and stay back. The immediacy of broadcasting was not only the future but, by 1960, frankly the present of news and information. Struggling against this fact was what had allowed ITN to almost immediately surpass the Corporation in the provision of television news.

What ITN had recognised was a greater curiosity and thoughtfulness on the viewers' part. The tacit system before they came along was for the BBC to provide cold, hard, ungarnished facts, and the newspapers to then go over them in detail, so the average Briton could find out precisely what to think about everything over breakfast.

"Comment" was permitted on the BBC, of course, and even encouraged, but at a safe distance from the news itself, cordoned off into separate programmes such as Panorama, which had been running since 1953. Even that had taken a couple of years and the injection of Richard Dimbleby to regenerate from a news and arts magazine programme to the current affairs behemoth we know today.

Only the newspapers were allowed to combine the two approaches at the same time. Greene may have got his start in newspapers, but any debt he owed the print media was long since paid. His loyalty lay with the present and the future, which were in sound and television broadcasting for the word at large, and at the BBC for himself. Combining straight information-based presentation of world events with thoughtful, in-depth analysis of them was what the public wanted. If it was intruding into the domain of the old, established media, that was their problem. This was how progress worked, by natural selection: the newspapers could adapt or they could die. Either way it wasn't any of Greene's business. His duty was to his own.

The traditionalist view from the likes of Haley was hardly going to go away, however, and even Greene couldn't ignore it when it cropped up in the BBC's own trade paper, The Listener, courtesy of already-distinguished biographer and author Joanna Richardson. She wrote, appalled, of the

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potential end of what she assumed was a ritual in many television-watching households - of "switch[ing] off at five to nine, and [saying] 'And now let's listen to the real news."

She also expressed horror at the basic idea of magazine programmes, comparing them to "hundredweight Sunday newspapers every single day of the week" and that the BBC was being disastrously populist in flirting with the format. "The BBC," she concluded, "should keep news and comment absolutely distinct…and it should cater for listeners (though they are only a million) who like to have the news straight and form their own opinions."

Now the criticism was coming from within, or damn close to within, Greene really had to respond, and finally sat down and wrote back to The Times, and to his own antepredecessor. Inevitably, it saw him largely playing defence. He insisted that the border between news and current affairs - though Haley was still calling it "comment", Greene used the updated term throughout - was and would remain solid. The word "bulletin" was still to be used on a regular basis, the Corporation's impartiality was absolutely not in question. Nor was there any question of the BBC becoming, or seeking to become, "all papers to all viewers and listeners", as Haley had put it in the original Times leader.

It was terse, it was crystal-clear and it was authoritative - the official word of the Director-General. It succeeded in, if not winning the argument (it certainly didn't do that) then in shutting the argument down sufficiently that the BBC could now press ahead with the changes. It also subtly indicated that Greene was definitely The Man now - that he ran the Corporation, not anyone else, and unlike Ian Jacob he wasn't going to just dutifully steer the massive hulk in the same straight line as his predecessors. Traditions were no longer safe just by dint of being traditions. From now on, if times changed - and they inevitably will - the BBC would change with them, at least as long as Greene had anything to say about it.

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