FACE FOR RADIO

The return of television meant the return of a particular irritant under the Director General's fingernails: the news. Haley, the old newspaperman, remained an expert and a partisan, and had already shown his colours by helping to build a truly remarkable, ahead-of-its-time news reporting unit that gave birth to concepts like the embedded war correspondent, and then unceremoniously dismantling it once the war was over and its stated mission was done. In this way he demonstrated both his expertise in the field of news, and his loyalty to the medium of print.

Now the issue raised its head again. The BBC didn't make its own television news as a matter of policy - they never had, even on the original service - preferring instead to simulcast the radio news bulletins with vaguely appropriate still images. Televised news with a human presenter, in imitation of the radio bulletins, was right out due to an almost insanely paranoid attitude to the power of the visual image, and the potential to read bias into it.

It was possible to deliver the news vocally in a flat, uninflected way that betrayed no attitude towards what was being said whatsoever, and the ultra-mannered received pronunciation delivery style, universally known by now as BBC English, was conducive to this. But the human face is orders of magnitude more complex a construction than the human voice, with any number of potential twitches of lip, shades of expression, tiny shifts in eyebrow position and even pupil dilation having the potential to be seized upon as some form of commentary, undermining the BBC's all-important impartiality (which had become holy writ) and leave the Corporation open to accusations of bias.

For Haley's part, he saw television news as fundamentally distinct from that on the radio, almost to the point of being a different genre of broadcasting. Not only could the addition of visual stimuli throw the BBC's precious impartiality into question, as far as Haley was concerned it unbalanced the entire dynamic to the point where the programming became, in Reith's old tripartite terms, "entertainment" rather than "information". In this he was not only concerned about the potential for reading into the newsreader's facial expressions, but the whole nature of the medium to shape a potential narrative:

"*The fact that the text of a bulletin would have to be received some hours in advance of the transmission time shows the necessity that would arise to subordinate the primary functions of news to the needs of visual presentation. Any such subordination would prejudice all sorts of*

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values on which the BBC's great reputation for news has been founded." [1]

He seemed to consider television news to be only barely possible: Britain's first attempt at it, ending each day's broadcasting on the original pre-war service, had consisted of a single locked-off shot of a clock, soundtracked by the regular nine o'clock radio news, piped in from Broadcasting House. As far as Haley was concerned, this was how it should remain post-bellum. Newsreaders should be heard and not seen, and the policy of playing the news in sound only fit that bill perfectly well.

This made sense to the higher echelons, the Governors and of course the Director-General himself, with his own agenda. However, it was less comprehensible to those on the ground, in the actual news department and at Alexandra Palace. Worse yet, the viewers themselves were less than convinced by the argument either. Six years of war had made them used to both the exploits of Richard Dimbleby, Wynford Vaughn-Thomas and the rest on the radio, but also the Movietone newsreels which offered the only visual peek (apart from the odd still image in the newspapers) at the unfolding global drama. The occasional Movietone newsreel had even appeared in the first year of the original television service in lieu of the BBC making anything particularly similar themselves. Now they were being told that if they wanted to see the news - moving about - they'd have to bugger off to the cinema, because such things were beneath the Corporation.

The pressure from both within and without grew until Haley finally gave in, and in January 1948, after eighteen months of calling a clock with the radio on the background "news", a bombastic theme and a crackling transmitter encircled by giant letters heralded the start of BBC Television Newsreel.

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