

THE PEACOCK NETWORK

Miall may have been the man with the plan in creating BBC-2, but he wouldn't, and was never intended to, be the station's first actual Controller once it had made it on the air. By the time Miall published his vision, that man had already been chosen, hand-picked for the role by Greene himself. His name was Michael Peacock, and his appointment raised a fair few eyebrows - largely because he was shockingly young for such a major role, at a mere 33. Even so, he was a BBC veteran, having taken the helm of Panorama at the age of 26. It was his tenure that transformed the programme from the general-interest magazine show implied by the title into the juggernaut of investigative journalism we know today.

Peacock introduced himself in the Corporation's in-house magazine Ariel with a certain amount of youthful arrogance, even passive aggression - underlining the extent to which he and the new station relied on outside factors before his programming-related job even became relevant:

"Assuming that the television industry provides us with our equipment on time; assuming that the Planning and Installation Department and everyone else gets it installed and working by April 1964; assuming we can find all the staff we need; assuming that Controller, Finance can balance the books; assuming all of this, perhaps the hardest task will be to create a completely new range of programmes for BBC-2." 

He also hinted, less than subtly, that the station would be a much more impressive proposition, and probably an easier sell to the public, if its launch were to coincide with the start of colour broadcasting in the UK. Even at the time, however, he probably knew this was the moon on a stick.

He wasn't wrong, however, about how hard programme planning was going to be. Miall's vision of mixed content, catering to minority interests without going full Third Programme, was all very well for him to lay out in a memo, but he wasn't the one who was going to have to implement it all. Peacock was the one who had to figure out a way of putting it into practice in a way that people would actually choose to watch. The solution that he brought to Greene and Miall was highly innovative for the time. Instead of trying to mix and match all the disparate elements and minority interests in a random stew, every day's viewing on BBC-2 would have its own distinct character.

Saturdays would be for alternative entertainments to all the sport broadcasting on both the other sides. Sundays, as befitting the Sabbath, would be important and serious and full of plays, classical music and foreign films. Mondays would be for family entertainment, particularly comedy.

Tuesdays, by sharp contrast, would be dominated by stone-faced educational documentaries under the umbrella name "Tuesday Term". Wednesday would be catch-up night, with repeats both recent and from the archives (bare as they were then) under titles like Encore and Look Again. Thursdays were where those pesky minority interests ended up - jazz versions of Julius Caesar, arts magazines and programmes about music theory and technique. Friday was another "family entertainment" day like Monday, but concentrating on drama instead. At 10:15 there would be an in-depth news programme, and the night would close off with something too esoteric for prime time, like a jazz magazine or a detailed Parliamentary update.

This may not look so extraordinary now, but it raised eyebrows in 1964. Some, both inside and outside of the BBC, were sceptical about there being enough material to go around, but others understood Peacock's thinking. Most had expected a schedule pattern that reacted in some way to what was becoming BBC-1 - probably by taking whatever the main channel was showing and finding something opposite in tone; comedy against drama, light entertainment against news and so on. Peacock's solution disregarded BBC-1 entirely and concentrated on building an identity for BBC-2 - or multiple identities depending on the day of the week.

Transmitters went up. Tubes connected to tubes. The 625-line network was built with few major issues. New sets and aerials went on sale. Everything came together relatively smoothly to ensure BBC-2 was ready for launch in April 1964. Mascots were selected: two cartoon kangaroos named Hullabaloo and Custard, where the former represented what was now and forever BBC-1, and the latter, her joey, peeking out from her pouch, was the avatar for the new station. They were seen throughout the Radio Times and the national press- they even had squeaky toys and their own theme tune, played by the Bob Miller Orchestra, on Ember records - in the months leading up to opening night, which was due to see a real kangaroo at Lime Grove Studios ostensibly being "interviewed". This turned out to be a bad idea for more reasons than might have been expected.