BREAKING NEWS

Haley had given notice of where his true loyalties lay six months before the War ended at a speech to the Radio Industries Club:

"It is no part of the BBC's function to become another newspaper. News is only a small fraction of the BBC's activities and output. The spoken word can supplement the written word; it cannot replace the written word."

This should have been taken as a warning from the Fleet Street defectee: once a newspaperman, always a newspaperman.

Now peace had finally arrived and the world could get back to normal - or, more accurately, regain the luxury of being able to consider something as potentially "normal" - Haley found himself in one of the most powerful jobs in Britain, as the head of its unofficial socio-cultural hub. Now the world wasn't at war any longer (the Pacific theatre notwithstanding) he was free - indeed, had a duty - to impose his vision on the nation.

That vision did not include the BBC as a major news-gathering organisation in its own right - despite the fact that they had excelled at it during the conflict, to the extent of inventing techniques and roles now considered fundamental to broadcast current affairs. From the notion of live (or at least as-live), narrated coverage of events as they happened, to the very concept of the broadcast news correspondent, the War Reporting Unit pointed the way to the future. It seemed, however, that it was not a future William Haley particularly wanted.

The War Reporting Unit quietly disbanded, with little or no publicity, shortly after VE Day. By VJ Day there was barely a trace of it remaining in the Corporation. Equipment was sold, dozens were laid off, and the BBC's newsgathering operation was scaled back down to the bare minimum. Now the war was over, the BBC was going back to sourcing its news from the Press Agency, Reuters and the like, instead of finding and writing it for itself. It was, after all, no part of the BBC's function to become another newspaper - or indeed, it seemed, to compete with them. Certainly not to an extent that might do them harm.

It was an act of deliberate self-sabotage that cheered a lot of Haley's old friends back in Fleet Street while desperately disappointing many of his actual employees. It was a (deliberate and very specifically designed) step backwards, at one of if not the worst possible time to do so. War Report

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and the activities of the War Reporting Unit had captured the public imagination in the last year of the conflict, and had made household names (itself a new-fangled notion) of Wyford Vaughan-Thomas, Geoffrey Talbot and Richard Dimbleby. In turn, they and their colleagues had transformed news from a dictated and neutrally presented list of events into something vibrant and immediate. Now they were going back to the first way. The genie was stuffed back into the bottle. “Inform” and “entertain” had started to overlap, and now they were being pulled apart again. John Reith, presumably, approved of such a notion, but the public were less enthusiastic.

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