TAKING WESTMINSTER ABBEY (BY STRATEGY) II

The Television Service held even more and bigger meetings than Sound. Again, roles were decided early. Most prominent was Peter Dimmock, Head of Outside Broadcasts (Vision) and foremost authority, probably worldwide, on the techniques necessary to broadcast live, visible coverage of things happening. He had organised the host coverage of the 1948 Olympics, state-of-the-art vans and cameras and all. He also brought the Boat Race to screens for the first time, even providing the commentary himself. He was the natural choice to produce the Coronation's television coverage.

While the Sound broadcast had twelve commentators dotted around the parade route, with John Snagge as their chieftain, television would have one voice, and it was decided early on that it should belong to Richard Dimbleby. Already a trusted voice of authority from his embedded reporting in World War II, his nine-hour stint in a glass box in the middle of London would cement his legend.

Precision had to go hand in hand with pragmatism. At one point it was decided that the camera embedded on the organ screen in the middle of the orchestra - a decision made under the assumption it would be unmanned and automatic - would turn out to need an operator after all. Which is how Anthony "Bud" Flanagan - the lucky winner of an impromptu hunt for the BBC's smallest cameraman - ended up crouching precariously atop the organ like a human Tetris block, cello pegs at his back, bow sawing back and forth between the camera and his feet. It was marginally easier than the trenches of World War One, mostly because the Archbishop of Canterbury didn't use live ammunition. For his pains, Flanagan would go on to an influential executive career at ATV, where he ended up as Programme Controller.

In January, Peter Dimmock had a brainwave and popped over to Washington, where they were having their own Coronation, on a smaller scale: a new President (Dwight Eisenhower) was about to be sworn in, in the second inauguration to be televised. From shadowing how the American media handled their (admittedly smaller) ceremony, Dimmock gained a few invaluable insights. Mostly these were about how bloody difficult this was going to be, but the experience also warned him off using "Peeping Tom" cameras placed right up next to the action for close-up filming. Such cameras had been in use at Eisenhower's inauguration and had raised hackles there, and that was among vulgar colonials. If they weren't ready for blistering closeups of Mamie Eisenhower blowing her nose, live in 425 lines, the British public certainly weren't, even (or especially) with the Queen Mother instead. A tasteful distance would be maintained, with zoom lenses in use for certain poignant moments (like the five year old Prince Charles watching the Archbishop putting the shiny

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hat on his mother's head).

Plans were drawn up to make it as global a broadcast as possible, which in the event wasn't an awful lot - the only other commonwealth country with its own regular television service at this point happened to be Canada. Every single transmitter the BBC, or anyone else, could get their hands on was pressed into service to beam the images as far as possible. Of course, the whole thing was recorded for posterity as well, and when it came to sending out the telefilm recordings, Canada were quite deliberately and pointedly prioritised over America.

Everything was finally declared "ready", at least in theory, by February. "Everything", in this case, referring to the infrastructure and physical details of broadcasting, the who and the what in the where now. Now it was time to consider the actual broadcast itself, as in the "Coronation as TV programme". The obvious thing to do would be to just show the ceremony, with Dimbleby commentary, and leave it at that, much as they had for her father's Coronation. But purely utilitarian broadcasting of that sort really belonged in the thirties, when it was all the technology was capable of, and it was impressive that broadcasting existed at all. Television as a science was starting to leave its adolescence; as a medium it was still in its relative infancy. The Coronation represented one of the first major opportunities for it to step beyond mere functionality - to comment on, decorate and even shape events rather than just depicting them.

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