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THE BREATH-TAKING BUSINESS OF BROADCASTING

When One Man Talks To The World

This exciting account of exciting but everyday happenings behind the scenes in a BBC News Studio was written by Denis Ireland for the Belfast "Irish Times"

ON a November evening three years ago, I was sitting in the newsroom in Broadcasting House, London, W.1, waiting for a certain well-known announcer, the genial Mr. X, to whom I was to be attached for the evening as a kind of apprentice. The time was 5.45 p.m. Mr. X was due on the air at 6 p.m., and meantime, I watched the editors preparing his script in a kind of last-minute frenzy.

A last-minute frenzy, that is, as far as the editors and sub-editors were concerned. But, as far as his outward appearance and manner seemed to indicate, the frenzy was not shared by the genial Mr. X himself.

He arrived in the newsroom about 5.55, had a few words with the editor, was handed his first sheaf of typescript, collected his apprentice in the person of myself, and then we started for the news studio. Some of the details and the timing may be a bit blurred now, but I remember thinking that we were cutting it pretty fine. Afterwards I discovered that the old hands in Broadcasting House have an uncanny sense of timing. Long practice has taught them the exact number of minutes or seconds it takes to walk from one office or studio to another. Proceeding on this principle (and proceeding is the only word to describe our leisurely progress down flights of concrete stairs and along empty, echoing corridors), Mr. X. and I arrived in the studio from which the news was to be read a few seconds before 5.59. On the principle of the Scotsman's change, we had got there, but only just.

The News Studio

This news studio to which all Britain and considerable portions of the world beyond would be listening in a few seconds, was a tiny, triangular compartment, so small that when Mr. X. had sat down at his reading desk and I had managed to get myself stowed away on a chair opposite him, there seems now in recollection to have been very little room for anybody else. That last half minute jerked off on the electric clock, and there descended on the studio that heart-grIPPING silence that, no matter how far my experience of broadcasting should carry me, will probably never fail to thrill me to the marrow. The red signal light on the wall began to flicker.

This meant that the engineers, high up in their vast, roof-lighted hall at the top of the building, were locating us in the studio, making certain that the an-

nouncer was in position and ready to begin. Mr. X. in reply pressed a push-button on the desk in front of him, or in the technical language of the BBC "buzzed in," thereby showing by means of a light signal in the control-room that everything was O.K. in the studio and that he was ready to go on the air. Almost immediately the signal light on the studio wall, instead of flickering, glowed steadily.

The Studio is "Live"

This meant that, provided a certain knob governing a certain dial on the miniature control panel on the announcer's desk was in a certain position, the studio was "live," and every slight sound in it, from a cough to a creaking of a chair, would go out to the ends of the earth.

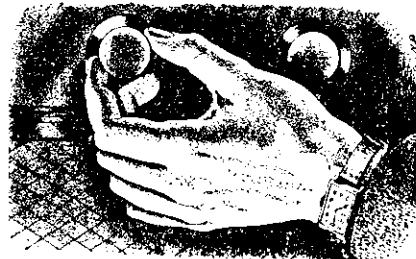
But more about that knob on the miniature control panel later. At the moment, though I had broadcast on many occasions myself, I was an apprentice to the business of reading the news, and before I had finished with my preliminary experience of a news studio that knob was to give me a severe shock. All I knew for the moment was that immediately the red light glowed steadily Mr. X. made some mysterious movement, with his hand, which I could not see because the panel intervened, and the reading of the 6 o'clock news began with the usual (pre-war) weather forecast of depressions from Iceland and the usual SOS and police messages.

Last Minute "Break"

Before long I got a further insight into the apparently overpowering passion of the young gentlemen upstairs in the news-room for what is known as a last minute "break." Mr. X. had started with, as far as I could make out, about three sheets of double-spaced typewritten foolscap. These, even at the slowest reading, could not last him more than about four and a half minutes, and I began to wonder what happened next. I wasn't left very long in doubt. Just at the point when he had reached about the last paragraph but one on the last page, a white face appeared at the inspection window in the swing doors, and a young man shot in with a further instalment of the news. Mr. X. continued to read his last paragraph, then turned to the latest instalment, containing presumably, the actions and reactions of the big world during the four and a-half minutes we had been in the studio. There was a silence for a moment while he glanced over the addenda. Then in a loud voice he said:

"Good heavens, how do you pronounce that?"

I nearly shot off my chair. Had the BBC in the person of one of its star



announcers, gone off its head? Then in a flash I realised that by twisting the knob in front of him he had taken the studio off the air. A short conversation took place between him and the emissary from the news-room about the pronunciation of the place name in India; then with another twist of the knob he went on calmly with the reading of the news. The messenger retired, but before long he was back again with a further instalment, a sort of radio Sisyphus, vainly trying to keep pace with the deeds and misdeeds of the spinning globe. As each batch of typewritten foolscap arrived on the reading desk the studio went off the air for a moment.

Reconstructing the Scene

And ever since, when listening to the news from London, I find myself reconstructing the scene in that dramatic little studio. By tuning the receiver high I can tell the story of the happenings in it in terms of sight as well as sound, always allowing for different announcers. Some announcers, for example, take the studio off the air to cough or clear their throats, others only for the sudden dramatic consultations that sometimes arise with the arrival of fresh news. In the intervals there is the sound of that swing door, audible for the expert who knows how to listen for it; at times even whispered conversation in the background. In addition, there is the curious "dead" quality in the receiver when the studio is off the air.

That miniature control panel or "mixer" on the announcer's reading desk is, in fact, a very present help for a sorely over-driven and harassed profession. But it has its dangers, and there are, of course, certain classical BBC stories arising from its misuse, the best, if the most unreliable, being about a certain announcer who heartily detested a certain well-known politician. Catching sight of the offending name in the latest batch of news, and having forgotten to turn his control knob far enough, he is said to have exclaimed in a voice that rang throughout the Empire where the sun never sets: "That old — again!"

Announcer's Life

Those, however, are the lighter moments. For the most part the announcer's life is nerve-wracking and exacting, and contrary to what the public believes, many of his duties lie behind the scenes and away from microphones altogether. But to concentrate on the

(Continued on next page)