

THE VOICE ISN'T EVERYTHING

A Radio News Reader Has No Easy Job

IN this article from "London Calling,"

Antonia White tells something of the work of the men who day after day read the BBC news bulletins from London. "It takes a lot more than a voice to make an effective News Reader," she says. He must also have a pleasant personality, faultless elocution, considerable knowledge of world affairs and geography, and also something of a journalist's flair for putting over a story crisply and clearly.

TWELVE times every twenty-four hours a news bulletin goes out in English in the BBC's Empire and North American Services. Millions of listeners know the voices of such men as Pat Butler, Robert Harris, Derek Prentice, Norman Claridge, and Bob Beatty, who specialise in the reading of the news. But those millions of listeners probably do not know that it takes a lot more than a voice to make an effective News Reader.

A News Reader in the Empire and North American Services does not appear like a cuckoo out of a clock a few seconds before his bulletin, speak his piece and disappear till the news comes round again. He is working behind the scenes in the Empire News Room for at least three-quarters of an hour before each of his periods on the air. He is a highly-trained specialist, requiring many other qualifications besides a good voice for shortwave broadcasting, a pleasant personality and faultless elocution. Since May, 1940, when news reading became an expert job on its own instead of being part of an ordinary announcer's routine, he is required to have a considerable knowledge of world affairs and geography, and something of a journalist's flair for putting over a story crisply and clearly. Also, he needs a training, almost as technical as a singer's, in the difficult art of broadcasting on shortwaves.

Must Soak in Atmosphere

A News Reader spends far more time in the News Room than he does at the microphone. He must keep abreast of every development. Only by soaking himself in the atmosphere of the news can he put real interest and conviction into his readings. Some time before each session, when the News staff has already prepared a part of the bulletin, the Reader comes into the picture. As the time of the broadcast draws nearer, more and more stories are put in front of him. Those he has already seen may be taken back and re-written because something fresh has broken, or a brand new item may be put in front of him at the last minute. He may, with the agreement of the newsmen, suggest the re-wording of certain phrases or the breaking up of sentences to make a bulletin more readable for him and more understandable to his listeners. The News staff, who have to master the difficult art of writing for the ear and not the eye, welcome his help.



BBC photograph

THE man who is now the Controller of the BBC's overseas services is John Beresford Clark (above), best known within the BBC as J. B. Clark, and best known throughout the Empire as Beresford Clark.

That phrase "throughout the Empire" is a significant one, because J. B. Clark was in at the beginning of the Empire Overseas Services, has been very largely responsible for their development and in the process of doing that, which has been his major interest in life, has travelled 40,000 miles in order to make personal contact with the listeners for whom he is catering.

Then comes his worst headache. With the war being waged on so many fronts, nearly every day strange names of places and people crop up. A mistake in pronunciation might have disastrous effects. So he must check up on each unfamiliar name to make sure he pronounces it correctly. By "correctly" the BBC does not necessarily mean the exact pronunciation used by a native of the country in question. It does not aim at giving the authoritative pronunciation from the purely linguistic point of view, but one which English-speaking listeners will understand. To avoid ambiguity, during the first twenty-four hours in which an unfamiliar place name appears, it is spelt out over the air. The focal point in the great pronunciation question is Miss Miller, who keeps in constant touch with legations and embassies and collects the necessary information every day.

But since news bulletins go out by night and in the small hours, as well as all through the ordinary working day, the News Reader may sometimes find himself in a tight spot. A strange name may suddenly crop up at a time when it is impossible to tap his sources of information. It may crop up in one of the "flashes" that are slipped on his desk when he is actually at the mike and halfway through his bulletin. All he can do then is to make the best shot he can until he can check up. The spelling out, letter by letter, of new

names was partly designed to meet such emergencies. It may irritate some particularly well-informed listeners, but perhaps they will be less irritated if they stop to think how serious the consequences of a misunderstanding might be.

Nerve-Racking Moment

One of the most nerve-racking moments in the News Reader's life—and it is a moment that occurs very frequently—is when a "flash" is slipped under his nose while he is reading his bulletins. Next time you hear the words "And here is a message that has just been received," imagine what is happening to the man sitting at the microphone thousands of miles away. The "message" which he reads with such fluency is probably a scrap of paper torn from the machine, written in odd abbreviations which he must decipher at sight. Here is the usual form in which a tape message arrives on his desk:

T RAF CARRIED OUT FIGHTER SWEEP OVR N FRANCE TODAY MCH DAMAGE TO ENEMY AIR-FIELDS STOP FIFTEEN ENEMY FIGHTERS DESTROYED STOP MGE ENDS.

That, however, would be as clear as daylight to his experienced eye, but a novice would find it alarming to read at sight with the right emphasis for, obviously, it cannot be read in this bald form but must be fashioned into sentences as he reads.

Speaking in Slow Motion

In shortwave broadcasting, where reception conditions are often difficult, experience shows that the normal rate of radio reading—150 words or more to the minute—is too fast to be intelligible, so News Readers must speak in "slow motion" at the unnaturally low speed of 120 words to the minute. This may sound easy, but try it yourself with a stop-watch and you'll find it exceedingly hard to make your voice sound interesting, natural, and not too laboured. At this pace you easily tend to drop your voice at the end of the sentence. At the worst, the last word is inaudible; at the best the monotonous "dying fall" of your voice makes the listener feel drowsy. Again, when you are reading five bulletins a day, in which some of the stories are bound to recur, the slow pace tends to make you get stale.

During training a budding News Reader hears his own voice played back to him over a closed circuit. This usually comes as a bad shock to him, for no one hears his own voice as another person hears it. The recorded voice sounds far higher pitched than the spoken voice sounds to the speaker. The victim has to learn how to overcome his bad habits before he can be allowed to broadcast. And the News Readers whose voices you now know so well are subjected at intervals to a kind of radio Gestapo. Without their knowledge their bulletins are recorded from time to time so that faults can be noted and checked before they have developed into habits.

Let's see
that tongue!



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