Radio Reports the War

NBC NEWS DIRECTOR SEES BROADCASTING'S ROLE IN COVERING THE PEACE EQUAL IN IMPORTANCE TO WARTIME NEWSCASTS

By William F. Brooks
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RADIO has taken its place in the news picture — with a bang—in the past five years. News always has been a part of radio programming, and radio has served the public from its inception with a certain quota of news broadcasts. In the past five years, however, news has come to the forefront in a way which few people expected prior to that time.

For twenty-five years, I have been in the news business and have watched the developments in radio news very closely. For fourteen years of that time, I was with the Associated Press. In 1937, I went to Europe and when I came back I went into radio. I took up the job of Director of News and Special Events of the National Broadcasting Company with a great deal of trepidation. I had been told it was a strange new world and that none of my news experience could be adapted to it easily. Fortunately, I have found this is not so. Hundreds of problems newspaper and press association men have to settle every day also have to be settled in radio, and because radio is so new compared to press I find that radio news men have borrowed heavily from the practices and procedures which have been standard in newspapers for scores of years.

In the News Department at NBC, we are charged with the writing and preparation of straight news broadcasts, the scheduling and contact with commentators, the arranging and covering of foreign pickups and the handling of special events. Up to the time the material actually goes on the air, the collection, preparation and organizational work required parallels to a large extent that of a press association or a newspaper. We have our news writing and special events staffs in New York, Washington, Cleveland, Chicago, Denver, San Francisco and Hollywood. Most of these men have spent a large part of their lives in newspaper work. I have found that virtually all of them have carried into radio the high principles and awareness of their responsibility to the public which was their daily fare in newswork.

Because of the difference in the method of dissemination, radio does have its special problems and certainly as many things can go wrong as quickly as on a newspaper. As a matter of fact, I think, more quickly! All of my newspaper life the minute hand on a clock regulated activity. As an executive editor of a press association, I have been on the receiving end of messages from some managing editors on occasions when the fact that an opposition service was two minutes ahead with a flash was conveyed in language none of us could permit on Page One, or on the air. In radio, it is the second hand that counts.

In England, I remember being quite amused when the BBC would end a program and leave you hanging on dead air for two or three or even several more minutes until it was time for the next program to begin. I really didn't appreciate what it requires to synchronize a broadcasting schedule as we do in American radio so that one program will slip smoothly into the next, and that switches from one point to another take place with clocklike precision.

Many things can botch a program —politics in Africa, for instance. John MacVane, who covered the African campaign for us, told me that he and Charles Collingwood of CBS both suffered a sort of sabotage. It seems that when they were broadcasting from Allied Headquarters in the early days of the African campaign, there were four French engineers attached to the station. Two were pro-Ally and two were pro-Vichy. When the pro-Ally men were on duty in the control room the signal was usually fine and clear; when the pro-Vichyites were operating, the broadcasters sounded like they were talking into a barrel, the engineers fiddling with the control knobs and generally making it difficult for the radio news men.

When I heard that story I couldn't help but remember a similar incident from my own newspaper work. I was a reporter on a middle-west newspaper and the printer in the back shop had a pet peeve against the chief of police of the town. Maybe the chief had given him a parking ticket, or

DON HOLLENBECK, NBC CORRESPONDENT ATTACHED TO ALLIED HEADQUARTERS IN THE TURBULENT AFRICAN CITY OF ALGIERS, COVERS THE FIGHTING FRONT IN ITALY BY AIRPLANE.

JOHN MAC VANE, NBC WAR REPORTER IN ALGIERS, BROADCASTING TO THE UNITED STATES FROM ALLIED NORTH AFRICAN HEADQUARTERS.

something. But in several months of painstaking effort I will swear I never was able to get any story into the paper about the chief without something going wrong. The slug with his name would be accidentally turned, the spacing would be off, or the name would be misspelled, even after the most careful proof-reading on my part.

Regular news broadcasts from abroad had been the business of radio for several years prior to the Munich crisis of 1938, but that event made them almost a daily necessity from then on. With the devil's brew of Europe thickening day by day, the National Broadcasting Company at once multiplied its foreign staff of reporters many times over. Instead of offices only in London, Paris, Geneva and Shanghai, a foreign staff was swiftly recruited in every important capital in the world, especially those of the likely belligerent nations.

Reporters Standing By

There were three requisites for membership on this staff—first, knowledge of news; second, a good speaking voice; and third, American citizenship. Long before the actual outbreak of war, there were NBC reporters in every European capital and most of those in South America, as well as in Tokyo, Manila, Batavia, Singapore, Sydney, Alaska, and scattered throughout Africa from Cairo to Johannesburg. Today—four years later—only two of those forty-five reporters are still at their same posts. They are John MacVane in London and Grant Parr in Cairo. The others have been shifted to other points, or have been recalled home, or are in Japanese internment camps. Their successors are carrying on.

Today, several important news areas have been eliminated from American loudspeakers, principally Berlin, Tokyo and Rome. In addition to Axis territory, listeners hear only occasionally from the neutral countries in Europe, although NBC is well staffed in every neutral capital there. These reporters are continually standing by for word from New York that they are wanted in front of their microphones, either for a special program or for the daily NBC roundups of international news at 8:00 a.m. and 7:15 p.m., EWT. Each Thursday, radiograms go out from New York telling each reporter abroad, to the exact minute and second, just what broadcasting time has been assigned him for each day of the following week. These radiograms may read like this:

"ROMAG
MOSCOW
WANT 1208 1210 TUESDAY
THURSDAY SATURDAY
ALSO 2319 2321 MONDAY
ETTHURSDAY RETURNING
NEWYORKWARD CONFIRM"

This sounds like nonsense, but the numerals are Greenwich Mean Time. Instead of radioing Henry Cassidy in Moscow that he should be prepared to broadcast from 8:10-8:12 a.m. EWT, on the following Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday, a time is given to him in Greenwich Mean Time. Greenwich Mean Time means ten minutes after noon in Greenwich, England, where the parallels of longitude begin. All he has to do is consult a chart which tells him what time it is in Moscow when it is 12:10 p.m. in Greenwich, England. That is the time that he goes to the Studio in Radiocenter Moscow, and begins his broadcast. Cassidy has no contact with NBC in New York or anywhere else just before or during his broadcast. He arranges with Radiocenter to broadcast his talk by short wave from Moscow on certain regular frequencies—for instance, 15,750 kilocycles for the 8:00 a.m. show in New York and 11,948 kilocycles for the 7:15 p.m. program.

RCA Relays Signal

Meanwhile, NBC in New York has given an order to Radio Corporation of America to pick up a signal of the Moscow Radio on those assigned frequencies at that exact time. RCA picks up the signal at Riverhead, New York, far out on Long Island, and feeds it over telephone lines to the master control desk in NBC. From there, it is fed to the studio where the news program is being conducted. Then, just ten seconds before Cassidy is due to start broadcasting in Moscow, the "m.c." of the news show—who may be either John W. Vandercook, W. W. Chaplin, or some other well known news commentator—will say something like this: "Our next report comes from Henry Cassidy in Moscow. We take you now with the speed of light to the capital of the Russian Soviet. Come in Moscow."

Moscow is a "blind" pickup. That is, Cassidy starts on a time basis because Moscow Radio cannot contact RCA by short wave, due principally to the Russian censorship. Even at points where censorship is lenient—such as Chungking and Algiers—we sometimes have difficulty contacting them due to sun spots or other atmospheric disturbances, depending even on the time of day or night the broadcast is attempted. But if censors and atmospherics permit, RCA in New York can converse with the foreign broadcast point and arrange final details for the pickup, to the point of telling the pickup point "Go ahead" at exactly the time that the cue is given on the network by the NBC announcer.

This calls for perfect conditions and split-second cooperation by half a dozen operating points, including the commentator in the studio, the announcer who is pushing the buttons on the announcer's panel for his microphone, his production man

in the studio who holds a watch on the program, the engineer in the control room who must select Moscow or Algiers or Chungking from among several foreign signals and feed it into the network at exactly the right time, the men on duty at the office of RCA, the engineer in the Moscow radio station and his announcer and production man and perhaps half a dozen other people somewhere along the line.

One of these points is the NBC Special Events department, where a man sits in the control room beside the engineer and listens in turn to all the foreign signals ordered up for the program. He must decide which ones are worth feeding to the network and, if possible, bring them in at exactly the time wanted. Of course, on the Moscow signal all he can do is approve it as understandable to the listener and listen to the time checks which Moscow puts on the air for several minutes in advance of the program.

He hears the Russian announcer in Moscow saying over and over in English: "Hello, New York. Hello, the National Broadcasting Company. This is Radio Center Moscow calling the National Broadcasting Company for Henry Cassidy, who will be on the air at 3:00 p.m. and ten minutes by Moscow time. By Moscow time it is now 3:00 p.m. and eight minutes exactly. Hello, NBC. Hello, New York. This is Radiocenter Moscow calling the National Broadcasting Company for Henry Cassidy, who will be on the air in exactly two minutes from now."

Timing Is Problem

The NBC Special Events man listens to the time checks, with his eye on the NBC clock. If Moscow is ten seconds faster than NBC, he must arrange for the switching cue to Moscow to be given ten seconds earlier than planned. If Moscow's clock is ten seconds slower than NBC's, he must arrange for the New York announcer to drag his cue—or eat up an extra ten seconds before calling in Moscow in order that there be no silence on the network. This sometimes involves cutting short the previous pickup point, which may be Australia, or London, or Algiers, and thus require the New York commentator to "ad lib" a quick cue to Moscow in order to make the switch on time.

This is only one of the problems involved. The Moscow signal may start strong and then grow weak or be interfered with by cross talk from another station on almost the same frequency, or by static, or sun spots, or the Aurora Borealis, or half a dozen other things. In that case it may be necessary to cut Moscow off the air and for the New York commentator to make a brief explanation and apology to the listener for the poor signal from Moscow.

There are a few foreign pickup points which the Special Events man in New York can contact direct just before their broadcast is wanted and thus check cues and timings with them, identify the broadcaster and afterwards give him the report on how his spot was received. This is true of London, Cairo, Panama, Bern, and Madrid. In addition to ordering the line from London to New York, NBC orders the New York-to-London half of the circuit also and thus can talk two-way with London before the broadcast. This is not true of many other points, which are received on one-way radio circuits.

This routine is followed on every news broadcast from abroad; rather, on every radio broadcast of any sort from abroad. It is duplicated many times a day, and the technique has been perfected to the point where nearly all broadcasts are delivered to the loudspeaker of the listener on schedule.

In handling such a 15-minute program of news from abroad, the NBC Special Events man sits at an object which resembles nothing so much as an old-fashioned school desk. On a panel in front of him, he has a dial with eleven channels on which he can, by turning a switch, monitor three signals fed up to him by RCA, also two signals fed by AT&T, as well as Station WEAF in New York, the rest of the NBC network, the announcer's office upstairs, and the principal New York stations of the other networks. In fact, he has two dials exactly alike, one of which controls a loudspeaker in his desk panel and the other which is fed through a pair of earphones. He uses the earphones to listen to one signal, and the loudspeaker to listen to another at the same time.

Other Things to Do

In case this appears to call for ambidexterity, it may be said that he has several other things that he must also do at the same time. He has a telephone to the production man in the studio adjoining the control room; he has an inter-office telephone through which he can get any other 'phone in the building as well as outside points such as Washington, Chicago, etc. He has an emergency 'phone on which he can reach all of the six or eight operating points of NBC which must

EDWARD WALLACE, STANDING THIRD FROM RIGHT, IS CHIEF NBC WAR CORRESPONDENT IN THE SOUTH PACIFIC. THIS PICTURE WAS MADE DURING A TRIP THROUGH THE SOLOMONS AND NEW GUINEA.

RALPH HOWARD, ATTACHED TO THE AIR FORCE COMMAND IN ALGIERS, TYPES A NEWS STORY FOR TRANSMISSION TO NBC IN NEW YORK.

function in case of any change of program plans. Then he has a "super-duper" emergency 'phone on which he can reach only the three essential operating points, which are the master control desk, the traffic department, and the announcer's office. He also has a switch which he can throw to talk direct to the adjoining studio when it is not on the air. He also has an electric teletype machine which NBC contracts for by the year and which reaches all the stations across the country that are managed and operated by NBC, such as KPO in San Francisco, WMAQ in Chicago, and other principal network operating points such as Denver and Hollywood.

With these half dozen methods of communication at his command, a Special Events director can make almost any necessary last-minute change required in the program. He can tell San Francisco to tell Australia to hold up their broadcast for a minute or two minutes if necessary. On his telephone line to London, he can tell the London announcer to cut his spot ten seconds short or to take an extra fifteen seconds or whatever may be necessary in order to make the next switch on time. He can reach Washington on a direct line to tell the commentator there to switch to New York instead of Chicago, if that is required. He can reach RCA by direct line to inquire what's wrong with the signal from Stockholm and whether or not it may be expected to improve, if it is bad. He can tell Chicago to watch for a cue to reverse the network earlier or later than expected. By this we mean that if New York is feeding the network to the West Coast and back, and a switch to San Francisco is desired, then six seconds must be allowed for operating points such as Chicago and Hollywood to cut the network feed from New York and to open the channel from San Francisco so that when San Francisco takes the air six seconds later, the network program will then be fed eastward to New York and thence back to San Francisco.

Many a time we have torn up a regular news show and thrown out Australia or Moscow in order to get in a special broadcast from Cairo or Algiers, as the case may be. It involves ordering facilities from one of the communications companies, notifying the Engineering, Traffic, Announcing and Production departments, and frequently the various switching points between New York and San Francisco. If we cannot make room for the broadcast on the network, we always record the broadcast by transcription here in New York and also monitor it while it is on in order to check on the nature of the broadcast. Then, if it is important enough, we can always play the record on our local station at a later time. If the news is of greatest importance or the special feature has some historical value, we can sometimes play it to the network, too.

Best Possible Service

At NBC, we have worked out a schedule of news broadcasts throughout the day which is intended to give the best possible service to the public. This program structure has been evolved from practical experience. We know there are certain people who turn their dials every few minutes to get a new news program, or a new commentator. But we also know that the majority of people like other types of information and entertainment mixed with their news broadcasts. To meet the increased demand for information, in the past few years NBC has stepped up its news coverage. In 1938, news reports, analyses, and special events took up 3.8 per cent of the total program time of NBC. In 1941 this had jumped to 10.5 and in 1942 it rose to 15.4 per cent.

No End of News

As far as I personally am concerned, I think we have about the proper proportion now, and that it would be bad programming to step this up in any considerable amount. We feel that we are servicing the bulk of our listeners throughout the day and night hours very adequately.

Trade reporters have asked whether we expect to maintain this proportion when the war ends. That is a very difficult question to answer, but I think that news of the peace is not going to be any less important than news of the war. As a matter of fact, I think it will be even more dramatic in some respects, and will affect more people directly than news of the actual fighting.

I am sure this view is not a new one, but some people seem to have the idea that the minute an armistice is signed, there will not be any more interesting news. I believe there will be an increased interest, and that both press and radio will have one of their biggest jobs in keeping the people informed of the readjustments and compromises which will have to be made before the world can completely disarm and embark on any safe program for the future.

The war is developing new equipment, and we are on the verge of new service and a new industry through the wider use of ultra high frequencies in fields of television, frequency modulation and facsimile. These new services are certain to assert a revolutionary influence upon our social and economic life in the years to come—and it is just as certain that both the press and radio will adapt these new discoveries in their respective fields for greater service to the listening and reading public.