

Crisis

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“Uh – Jack, uh – we have a problem.”

“Oh hi Bill, what’s up?” He switched the telephone receiver to his right hand and looked at his watch. Always hated to be bothered by problems from the floor, especially right after lunch.

“Well, it’s about our new Broadcaster, we – ”

“CMX-5? But the station just bought that one – it’s the latest in a fine line of computer broadcasters,” he quoted the specs, ““with guaranteed monotone to reflect professional objectivity and minimize audience upset’.”

“Yeah, I know Jack, but, uh, there’s a problem, with – ”

“With what, speak up Bill – ”

“ – with the voice, it – ”

“That voice has been designed and tested for maximum appeal, in pitch and timbre – ”

“I know, but – ”

“And if there is a problem you can just reprogram it – a little deeper or a little fuller or – ”

“I know, I know Jack, it’s not that, it does just fine on the sports and the weather and the upcoming events, and the stock market report and the farm report, but – ”

“But what, I tell you that’s a perfect machine, we spent a lot of money on CMX-5 – ”

“It’s the news, Jack.”

“What news, what do you mean?”

“The news broadcast.”

He tried to be patient in his frustration. “Well, what about the news broadcast?”

“Well, it started a couple hours ago, on the eleven o’clock, it kind of slowed down – ”

Jack was relieved, and irritated at the incompetence of his subordinates. “Bill. The pace can also be reprogrammed. You should know that. You – ”

“But it’s not exactly the pace. I mean it’ll read one item at the right pace, say the item about the prime minister’s vacation, but then another item, that residential fire last night on Winwood Street, it’ll kind of, well, not exactly slow down, but have pauses every now and then – ”

“Look, please don’t sound so helpless. It sounds like just a loose wire or something. I’ll send a couple boys from Maintenance down first thing after break. It’ll be cleared up by the two o’clock.” He waited for a response.

It came, doubtfully. “Okay.”

Bill was sitting on a stool in the Broadcast Room, with a small notebook and pen in his hands. He had come down every hour since the maintenance guys left, to monitor any changes in CMX-5. The two o’clock news went fine. The pauses had started again at the three o’clock, but they were hardly discernible, and no worse than before. The four and five o’clock were the same.

That was encouraging – -at least the problem was stabilizing. He thought he'd just check it out once more, with the six o'clock, before going home.

“Good evening, this is the six o'clock news from KBC.

“First, the weather: the high today was 4°, low tonight expected to be 1°, brisk southwest

winds continuing up to 50 kmh, somewhat sunnier tomorrow with a high of 7°, chance of precipitation 0%.

“The Lavery Committee has released its report on tourism in Canada. The study took three years and cost three million dollars. More than one hundred recommendations are made in the report, the main one being that the provincial governments provide more money to support the industry of tourism.

“The RCMP announced it has laid fraud charges against Inwar Corporation of the United States, and its Canadian subsidiary. They allege that Inwar used false written and oral representations to defraud the federal government.”

So far so good. No pauses. Just a straight, steady and stable voice – setting a good pattern of response for all the listeners out there, he thought wryly.

“An economist at the University of Vancouver stated today that the recession in the first half of this year has been deeper than expected. Consequently, her predictions for next year, based on a computer model of the Canadian economy have been modified. Another upturn is still to come, but the inflation rate will be as high as 12.4% and the unemployment rate 18.6%.

“Another toxic pesticide has been discovered in Lake Superior fish. According to a report by The Good Earth, an environmental group, the pesticide, such like DDT, does not break down and thus will be around for at least a decade. Their research also shows that the pesticide does cause cancer.”

Bill waited for the next item. It seemed a little slow in coming. He made a note of the pause after the bit about cancer.

“And now for our feature item. The situation in India has suddenly gone from better to worse. The cease fire was violated without warning less than an hour ago in a vicious attack on a small town just outside the capital. An estimated two thousand people were killed –

Bill was busily noting the pauses when he realized how warm he felt. He got up and walked over towards CMX-5 – a wave of heat hit him about two feet from the machine. After a quick decision to risk staying with rather than leaving the malfunctioning machine, he continued to scribble his observations.

“...including all occupants of an emergency medical unit sss and the local school.”

The last few words were higher in pitch, he noted. And –

“arrfg umph sss – “

Bill looked up from his notebook. What was that?

“Officials say it is unfortunate that umph there was a school in their target site they emphasized that the town *had* to be attacked umph ARRrr umph sss”

He waited. There was no more. Bill got up in amazement. No upcoming events, no stock market report, not even a proper sign off.

“umph sss” barely audible. “sss”

He went over to pull the plug out, to prevent a complete blow-out, but something stopped

him. He couldn't, quite. He sat down, puzzled.

"Sss. umph."

He stayed and listened to CMX-5 for a few more minutes until the strange sounds seemed to subside. Then he left.

It was eight-thirty. Bill was sitting back in his office. The ashtray on his desk was filled with butts. His fingers nervously flicked the cigarette – he had stalled long enough.

"Jack, uh, it's Bill again."

"Another problem?" Jack asked, mocking.

"Well – yeah." He hesitated.

"What is it this time?"

"Well, you know the cease fire was violated in India, they had a tiff, a little skirmish kind of, and – "

"*You* don't have to give me a news report!"

"Well, you know there were 2,000 casualties, and well that was an item on the six o'clock and – "

"And?" He cut him off to get to the point.

"It cried Jack, I swear to god the thing cried – " he blurted. There was a silence at the other end.

"It had been pausing again, you know, like I said, all through the item, then it started to snuffle or gurgle kind of, I was there, you know, to monitor it after the maintenance guys left, and well it started to overheat a bit. Then all these strange chuffling sounds began, and then the voice distorted, the pitch and timbre seemed to fluctuate you know – it sounded like, well, like, it just made a mess of that item, I – " He stopped suddenly.

Jack was still silent.

"Jack? The seven and eight o'clock weren't too bad – but – the eleven o'clock – you know, that child suicide – the full story is slated for the eleven o'clock, and I – well – " his voice trailed off.

There was a pause.

"Yeah. Okay Bill. I'll call Herb Richardson right away and see if he can come back in to do the eleven o'clock..."