

THE BRITISH BROADCASTING CORPORATION

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PERSONAL & PRIVATE

1st February, 1939.

My dear John,

Day's end is a poor time at which to do justice to your memorandum, but day's end it must be. I have now read it so many times that I am beginning to wonder whether I understand it at all. Perhaps we had better test that by setting down briefly what I interpret you to mean. On the basis of that I can perhaps say something, and I will add thereafter haphazard points relating to various things said in your memorandum.

The scheme, as I understand it, is this: if Broadcasting and Films are in their influence to contribute to ends which are socially desirable, certain preliminaries to action are necessary.

(a) We must discover what purposes should prevail in using radio and film to widen the area of popular appreciation of the various fields of knowledge. You outline under this head, steps which might be taken to ascertain such purpose, and add importantly an enquiry as to what can be done to realise such purpose.

(b) Assuming that purpose relates in some sense to public needs (whether real, i.e. conscious and expressed; or potential, i.e. unconscious, but likely to be felt, given a wider dissemination of knowledge), we must have greater knowledge of the nature of men's needs, and the possibilities of creating in them conscious needs relating to our defined purpose.

(c) As a by-product of this enquiry, we must explore the pathology of influence, and disclose the methods by which genuine needs are being side-tracked or are failing to be met because of ulterior motives on the part of those in a position to create and meet genuine needs.

(d) Seeing that Society may well fail to realise its own best advantage, either through obstinate adherence to traditional beliefs, or to social, religious and other prejudices, the conflict between the two must be brought home to it by the deliberate demonstration, as it applies to this or that sphere of knowledge, of the conflict of choice before it. Very properly you point out that it must be left to Society to make that choice, but equally properly you insist that Society has not the opportunity to face and make such choice until the specific issues are clearly demonstrated to it.

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This summary may be a fatal misinterpretation of your memorandum. If so, I do hope that if you can muster patience, you will tell me where and how I have mis-read you. But assuming for the moment that this is roughly right, let me try and tell you what I think about it.

As a scheme of work it seems to me that the above can be appraised in one of two ways. We can appraise it as a comprehensive scheme of academic research, (and I use the term "academic" with respect). Alternatively, we can appraise it as a specific scheme preliminary to action. The distinction seems to me vital, in that it sharply differentiates the purpose you have in mind, and in so differentiating the purpose, affects the relevance and value of given details in the enquiry you propose to undertake. By an academic enquiry, I mean one the goal of which is simply understanding or enlightenment. An enquiry, the outcome of which does not necessarily result in action at all. Having regard to the times, it may well be that persons like ourselves must be reconciled to a goal which gets us no further than a fuller understanding of our own nature and the nature of our times. To have laboured towards such an end seems to me worthy of respect. Its relevance to action is problematic, and it may be that we torture ourselves unnecessarily by aspiring not only to understand, but to realise our understanding even partially, in present action. I doubt, myself, whether among men of goodwill such aspiration can or should be scotched, but I come equally to the fuller recognition of the fact that pursuit of understanding is our prime inevitable heritage as thinking and sensitive people, and that we must reconcile ourselves in relation to our circumstance to a more or less partial and unsatisfactory realisation of our aims on the plane of action.

Basis for
intelligent
action?

} But it
can

As a scheme of academic enquiry then, I judge your plan to be wholly admirable. Over against your pre-occupation with ends socially desirable, your definition of the field of enquiry seems right, as does the proposed order of procedure. Your illustration of proposed procedure from that now being followed in the field of natural science is presumably cited only as illustration. You leave undefined the different fields in which similar procedure would need to be adopted to provide the necessary data for the comprehensive betterment of your society. As radio and film are probably capable of embracing and affecting all the manifold needs and activities of men, it seems that you have set yourself a promethean task. There is work here for a lifetime for an army of research workers. The fruits of such labour would be a record of our times of incalculable historical importance. You won't want me to elaborate or specify the necessary fields of such enquiry. I stand staggered in admiration of the extent of your proposed intention.

Yet I suspect from what is written in your memorandum, that the above is not your real intention. That, while you have outlined by implication, a gigantic scheme of academic enquiry, you have in mind something more concrete, more practical, and of more immediate

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relevance. The question 'What can be done?' echoes insistently through the pages of your memorandum. We come then, to consideration of the scheme from the point of view of action.

By action, I mean something to be done here and now, within the framework of present circumstance, and in full appreciation of the limitations of ~~the~~ action which are thereby set. I have now to ask myself how much of what you propose is practicable, how much of it is indeed relevant to practice. Immediately, and perhaps inevitably, I am now beset with doubts. My first doubt has reference to time. Enquiry as detailed and comprehensive as that which you propose runs the grave risk of letting time and opportunity pass you by. Is it not possible that before your evidence has been obtained (if, by the symposium method you propose, you can in fact achieve approximate agreement among the participants at all), the practical relevance of what you discover may, to a large extent, be out of date, untimely?

*practical while
you study*

My second doubt derives from my experience as a practitioner. Work in radio and in film is inevitably empirical, it might indeed be less so if there were more concerted purpose and a more generous supply of scientific data for action. To that extent I am with you in the pursuit of your ends. I only question whether, having regard to the job to be done, to the urgency of the times, and to the rapidity and fickleness of change in public sentiment, aspirations and all but fundamental needs, you may not be biting off more than you can chew. Seeing that at this point I am critical, let me illustrate my doubt by suggesting the practical alternative to what you offer. Having regard to things to be done, isn't there evidence enough without much more research, of urgent needs which can and should be met by films and radio - given in films and radio the will and the intention to get such things done (a point of policy) and given also a sufficient personnel equipped mentally and morally for the doing of such jobs.

*amateur vs
professional!*

*We paralleled
this with action
of Am. 7, 8, 9
Contra.*

This brings me to my third doubt, which equally derives from practical experience, and leads me to question, perhaps impertinently, whether in your memorandum you don't confuse the fundamental difference between academic and practical intention. Let me illustrate my point: you say, "The findings of such exploration should provide an answer adequate for practical purposes, to the question, 'What needs would you relate knowledge offered the public in order to create genuine public appreciation of it?' ". This seems to imply that, provided facts were available which are at present absent, broadcasters and film directors could be prevailed upon, as it were ~~even~~ ^{by} some inward and inevitable logical compulsion, to act according to the facts. This seems to me a false and academic presumption (I use academic here in the bogus sense of the term). Is this not a dangerous non sequitur? The failure to provide for vital potential needs derives surely, not as you imply, from ignorance of them, but from the vested interests and purposes of the media failing to provide them. These media are not in fact interested in your ends. Even, and this is

*Finding no
process*

*Growing interest
here*

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questionable, if these ends could be demonstrated to be profitable, many considerations would offset the advantages of their pursuit.

This consideration in turn, drives me back to the beginning of your memorandum. "In both fields the machinery for advance is now ready." Machinery - yes, if you mean simply instruments. Machinery - no, if you include, as from a practical point of view you must, personnel, constitution and history. "It is clear that the Foundation or the Board should not be directly concerned with financing production, except as production has definite experimental or demonstrational value". Here, of course, I speak in ignorance of much that is most relevant to what you say: I don't know enough about your country. But I should hazard, as in my big report to you, that to achieve the ends you have in mind you are likely to fail if you rely on any or all of the present instruments available to you for their execution. I feel very sceptical, and the more so if by research and thought and discussion, you qualify and specify your ends, whether you will live to see them executed other than by the sponsorship or independent execution of your Foundation. Either, it seems to me, you must yourself launch this experiment, not necessarily on a nation-wide basis, but (and perhaps preferably) in a restricted field within which demonstration is practicable without ruinous expenditure, or by methods of practical diplomacy quite different from the reasoned and orderly procedure which you have in mind.

As I see it, therefore, you have set yourself not only a gigantic problem, but an immediate and immensely difficult problem of choice. It seems to me that the distinction of intentions which I have tried to make is of paramount importance, and that the danger lies in possible confusion between the two. Again and again in your memorandum I think I find the latent, and to me most sympathetic, emotion that in the field of practice, knowledge and reason will triumph. In my experience they don't and won't. To expose, for instance, the "pathology of influence" will not be to dispose of it. The communication of knowledge to the public will not, by some inevitable process, infect them with the necessary wants. "Materials from the humanities and the arts could quite properly be utilised in qualifying how society profits from individual freedom of thought, speech and action, even when the individual runs counter to what society ordinarily sanctions." Quite properly indeed, but to what effect? Only by insistent and ingeniously devised propaganda, by passionate appeals, and the personal expression of a profound moral conviction, can others be prevailed upon to associate themselves with our convictions, with knowledge put at their disposal. If you are concerned with the practical, it is with considerations of this kind and of their implications, that you will find yourself concerned. If it is your intention, in any real and practical sense, to harness radio and films to immediate practical social purposes, much of your memorandum will, I think, go by the board. If this is indeed your concern, it seems to me that you and your Foundation must remove the caveat that stands near the head of your memo-

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random, that as a Foundation "you should not be directly concerned" with the execution of your plans.

stands still?

There remains the first alternative, the academic. Education, like the Roman Catholic Church, has always concerned itself primarily, not with the here and now, but with the fruits of knowledge and understanding. These can and must be cultivated at all times. Their relevance at any time to the immediate present is obscure, and that obscurity has often, and above all at the present time, led scholars and those who pursue knowledge to a fatal and selfish misinterpretation of their mission. But that world of value stands. That those values are assailed today is immaterial. It is one of the great burdens that such of us as try to think and feel, have to carry. Owing to the pressure of events our danger is that under strain we may become confused of the clear distinction between practice and understanding, knowledge and action. It means a hell in life for every one of us.

I'm afraid this doesn't help much, and that all this may amount to no more than a record of the symptoms of distress in my own life, but like the letter I've penned to you, it's sent in good faith and with a deep regret that I should be of so little use to you or to anybody else.

Yours ever,

Charles 6

P.S. All this may drive you to the conclusion that I'm a case for the doctors. Hadn't you better provide medical attention for me in New York, and summon me for treatment pretty soon? That at least, is a golden thought for a sick man.

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