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911
Program Policy
Radio +
motion pictures

INTER-OFFICE CORRESPONDENCE

FROM: JM

DATE: September 13, 1938

TO:

COMMENTS:

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SUBJECT: Next Jobs in Radio and Film.

Work in radio and film has now progressed to the point where it seems in order to look ahead.

In general, work to date has aimed at getting in order the machinery essential for further advance. In both fields the machinery for advance is now ready. The jobs to be faced are all concerned with what advance is to be.

In both fields, 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. Other sources of support for production are available and can be tapped. If foundation support for production is known to be available, these other sources are liable to dry up. The cost of adequate production in both fields will be so great that any support which foundations could make available would be bound in the long run to prove insufficient. It therefore seems sounder to force production from the start to look for its support to the broadcasting companies, the film companies, and the various educational and public service agencies that can find funds for production in both fields if they are obliged to.

But, more important, there are other jobs which can hardly find support except from foundations. These are the jobs which it now seems in order to explore as possible next steps for the Foundation. All these jobs relate to what is to be done with the machinery now available if advance is to be solid and socially desirable. Each constitutes an approach to this basic question from four different directions.

I. The first job is to discover what purposes should prevail in using radio and film to widen the area of public appreciation of the various fields of knowledge. For, in their use, it is the purposes to be served that determine both the content and method of interpretation.

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The job of discovering these purposes is one for which the Foundation is perhaps unusually well equipped. Its five divisions have a command of knowledge and personnel in their respective fields which would be hard to equal. In general, the procedure would probably be similar to that now being followed in the field of natural sciences. Here the first step was to ask competent representatives of the various natural sciences what purposes they believed should prevail in the interpretation of the natural sciences for a general public. The second step, now under way, is an appraisal of what is now being done to interpret the natural sciences through radio, film, museums, and print, in terms of conclusions arrived at by this first conference group. The third step will be to call a conference which would include both competent representatives of the sciences, and at least two representatives of each of the four media mentioned above - one a policy making-executive, the other a practitioner or producer. Discussion at this conference, which would be based on the proceedings of the earlier conference and the appraisal of what is now being done, would aim at answering the question, what can be done.

It now seems probable that this procedure in the case of the natural sciences will yield a useful body of expert opinion on what purposes should prevail in interpretation. To some extent these purposes will be assigned relative value in terms of what natural scientists believe important. Ideally, of course, this first job in its outcomes should provide an answer to the question, what appreciation of the various fields of knowledge should the American public have at this time. But it seems doubtful if any but representatives of the social sciences would have a basis for agreement on that score, and even they might find actual agreement difficult. How this first job would be rounded out in this respect, then, remains a question.

— II. The question, what can be done in interpretation, points to a second job. It would seem axiomatic that genuine public appreciation can be created only as what is offered for appreciation is directly related to what the public wants (both what it desires and what it lacks - in many instances without being conscious of a lack). At present, we have for the most part only opinion on what the public wants - opinion arrived at in most cases by inference from instances where public reception of what was offered implied that a want was met. If genuine public appreciation is to be created, genuine knowledge of what the public wants has to be arrived at.

As Hogben remarks (Retreat from Reason), "people do not happen to be equipped with instinctive powers for recognizing the presence of ascorbic acid in their food". Expert exploration of this particular physiological want was necessary before there was any general public appreciation of the need for lime juice or its equivalents in any but special circumstances. The need for Vitamin C was generally appreciated only when expert exploration demonstrated the physiological requirement of it, and the lack of it in customary diet.

Essentially, then, this second job is to explore what AG has termed the "pathology of ignorance" with the view to discovering what treatment and diet is needed to establish and maintain the state of health for which the first job would be expected to set standards. From the first year's work of the Princeton Radio Research Project, it appears that the present resources of social psychology in this country are now sufficient for such exploration.

Basically, this Project is attempting to discover public needs which radio can satisfy. From individual psychology it derives its data on requirements for mental health that prevail for all or for large groups in our society. From the other social sciences, especially from sociology, it derives its data on what society offers (or fails to offer) for the satisfaction of those requirements. The correlation of these data points to areas where critical social needs exist. The Project, then, proceeds to explore the nature of those needs empirically.

One such area of need which the Project is now exploring is the discrepancy between individual aspiration and accomplishment on the hypothesis that our culture (e.g. through broadcasting) is setting up aspirations for its members for the realization of which society is not supplying the requisite economic and educational means.

The findings of such exploration, though necessarily gross, should provide an answer adequate for practical purposes to the question, to what needs would you relate knowledge offered the public in order to create genuine public appreciation of it. Thus, the Princeton Project seems to promise a pathology of ignorance on which radio could base its efforts to widen public appreciation of the various fields of knowledge. A next step, then, might be a similar study of the motion picture audience - the feasibility of which JM is now looking into.

But many of these public needs are now to an unfortunate degree being satisfied by substitutes for genuine knowledge. To clear the way, then, for widening public appreciation of genuine knowledge involves a third job, namely, to expose the inadequacy of these substitutes - the job of exploring what might be called the "pathology of influence".

To show how influence exploits public needs as means to its ends may well be useful in putting the public on guard against the tricks of influence. But to detect influence necessitates discovering the ends it serves; and the clue to them is invariably to be found in what is not imparted. Influence, then, is pathological primarily in that what it offers is incomplete when contrasted with genuine knowledge.

The exploration of the pathology of influence, then, involves comparing what it imparts in any given instance with what would be imparted if the aim were to create public appreciation of genuine knowledge of the same subject. Here perhaps is a constructive approach to the problem of propaganda - seemingly the only approach sufficiently objective to be appropriate for an agency like the Foundation. What the procedure for this third job would be is not clear; but the need for what the job would yield, at least for work in film and radio, is such as to urge consideration for whatever possibilities this approach suggests.

IV. It now has to be recognized that individuals and societies are ordinarily ready to act on knowledge only when action does not conflict with the beliefs, habits, and even superstitions of the culture. If, then, efforts to widen public appreciation of knowledge in the various fields is to lead to action, the traditional beliefs of the culture have to be taken into account.

Without implying any general effort toward cultural analysis, the present and future uses of radio and film inevitably involve one set of these traditional beliefs, - viz. those which cluster under the general heading of democracy. In American society these beliefs could probably be formulated in some such way as this:

- 1 - That society exists to serve the general welfare of its members;
- 2 - That the general welfare is to be achieved with the least possible infringement of individual freedom of thought, speech, and action;
- 3 - That social conflict is to be resolved by reason (or reasonable persuasion) rather than by force (or authority).

It seems at present a fact that American society, like most others, is becoming more collectivistic; i.e., is placing more emphasis on the first of these beliefs than on the second and third.

Elsewhere in the world collectivism has been quick to make radio and films its instruments. At present the Foundation is giving support to efforts to make both these media more effective means of mass communication. Can the Foundation wisely neglect the possibility that this support may later prove only to have made them more effective instruments of collectivism?

Actually this is not a question which can be answered by the Foundation, but rather by the society it serves. The Foundation's job, perhaps, is to help society find its answer.

It is clear that radio and film can provide such help, particularly as they are used in efforts to widen the area of public appreciation; for, in serving this purpose, much of what they offer will necessarily have relation to listeners' traditional beliefs about democracy.

This can best be briefly illustrated in the case of radio programs on controversial questions, like the University of Chicago Round Table, or America's Town Meeting of the Air. In them we have speakers who bring special knowledge to the discussion of possible courses of social action. If it were agreed that in such discussions these courses of action also should be evaluated in terms of traditional beliefs about democracy, would it be too much to expect that the nature of those beliefs and their force in any given set of circumstances would be clarified? Presumably, too, such clarification would eventually lead listeners to recognize that under some circumstances they are actually better off in sanctioning certain infringements of personal liberty, or in submitting to authority in the interests of the general welfare.

Most efforts to widen public appreciation of knowledge in the various fields could readily be given a similar orientation. To evaluate the operations of society in terms of what they offer for the general welfare would evidently be quite in accord with the purposes likely to be agreed on as those which should prevail in interpreting materials from the social sciences. Or again, to exemplify the methods of science - a purpose certain to be agreed on as one that should prevail in the interpretation of materials from the sciences in general - would necessarily clarify traditional beliefs about the use of reasonable procedures as a means of solving problems and resolving conflicts. Similarly, materials from the humanities and the arts could quite properly be utilized in clarifying how society profits from individual freedom of thought, speech, and action, even when the individual runs counter to what society ordinarily sanctions.

Only by taking such traditional beliefs thus into account can interpretation be essentially complete; for only in this way are exposed the forces which prevent us from acting on what we know. To expose these forces offers a command of them - at least to the degree that we are able to revalue them and then to consider whether or not knowledge requires their modification.

The aim, then, would be a process of interpretation which neglects nothing that is known, either in respect to what is imparted, or to the process itself.

If the use of reasonable procedures is essential in our traditional beliefs about democracy, the influence of radio and film can properly be utilized in our democracy only in some such way. To see to it that these media are so used might well be society's answer to the question posed above.

The fourth job here suggested for the Foundation would be to make sure by discovering precisely what traditional beliefs our society holds about democracy. Possibly these beliefs would, on analysis, prove to be much the same as those here stated. But presumably analysis would show that society and individual members of it attach different values to those beliefs as circumstances vary.

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The real job of analysis, then, would be to discover as precisely as possible how these beliefs operate in relation to one another at different times and under differing conditions.

How this job would be accomplished is by no means clear. Evidently it would be a task for trained thinkers about society. But, if their work were well enough done to avoid any serious misdirection, it should supply the last-needed element for a genuinely democratic propaganda - the use of influence not in the direction of incomplete knowledge, but rather in the direction of the most that is at present known.

Such considerations may seem remote from the everyday practice of broadcasting and film making; but work in both these media needs direction: it is by such distant targets as these that its immediate aim is best narrowed.

JM

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