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Program Policy
Radio + Motion pictures

INTER-OFFICE CORRESPONDENCE

	DHS	1/22/36		Radio + Motion pictures

This is the outcome of an attempt to get somewhat clearer the definition of humanities program in radio and motion pictures that was adumbrated in our talk on Tuesday.

Both radio and motion pictures are recognized as instrumentalities potentially of great importance alike for formal education and for the general diffusion of culture. But they have so far been exploited for the most part for purposes of entertainment. Since this exploitation has been commercial, the effort has been to entertain as large a section of the public as possible. The vested interests which have now grown up under these circumstances are such as virtually to prevent taking chances with anything that does not have demonstrated "entertainment value" for the public at large. The result is, with a few exceptions, that the possibilities of radio and motion pictures have been explored only within a relatively narrow range.

Within that range, techniques have been developed which bring out something close to the full effect of materials dealt with. And those techniques are often applicable outside that range, when other purposes than entertainment predominate. But the opportunities for experimentation outside that range have been so few and so limited, that as yet relatively little is actually known of the possibilities that radio and motion pictures offer. It is, indeed, almost as if language had been used only for purposes of advertising: little by little its possibilities for other purposes would be recognized; but only when as those who recognized them were freed from the domination of commercial purpose would they discover much of what we know of the uses of language both in literature and in science.

It might be contended, then, that the uses to which radio and motion pictures can be put in education, and in the general diffusion of culture, cannot wisely be determined till their possibilities have been further explored. Otherwise, a decision on uses may be arrived at prematurely, before the appropriate techniques have been developed. If this is the case, the present need is for a period of experimental development. In this, the possible uses of these instrumentalities would naturally be kept in mind. But the predominant aim should be not to serve those uses, but to develop the medium, to work out new techniques appropriate to purposes other than entertainment. As this was accomplished it is not impossible that other, more important uses would be indicated, which at the present stage of development are not likely to be thought of.

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The most promising way of achieving this end seems to be in offering a few younger men with a talent for these mediums an opportunity for relatively free experimentation. The aims of this experimentation would best be determined by the selection of men of interests such as to assure its being directed toward serious purposes - men interested primarily in education, literature, criticism, or in disseminating the findings of the social or natural sciences. While their experimentation would not lack direction, it would not be limited by a too narrow concept of its purposes, but would be free to explore whatever possibilities the interests of the experimenters suggested as vital.

This, in fact, is the rationale of the recent fellowship appointments for work at CBS headquarters in New York. The next step is to institute some similar arrangement in the field of motion pictures. If this step proves feasible - and if the views here embodied are in general valid - there is some reason to concentrate attention for the present on activities of this character. In them, division of purpose between formal education and the general diffusion of culture might impose an artificial - and unnecessary - limitation on experimentation. Though there will be instances - Parker's, for example - where a division will be natural, in general the predominating aim should be the free development of the medium. Hence, for the present, it may be administratively expedient to allocate all activities in radio and motion pictures to one program. Subsequently, when these possibilities are better known, their uses for specific purposes in formal education, and in the diffusion of culture, will naturally fall within the special concern of various programs.