

LORD HILL OF LUTON

## GROWING POINTS OF TELEVISION

*At a luncheon given by the Incorporated Society of British Advertisers in March of this year, Lord Hill of Luton, the Chairman of the Independent Television Authority voiced some opinions which, though applied to British television, have a wide significance to all those interested in the development of television. These points have been incorporated in the following article.*

THE SOMEWHAT CHANGED ATTITUDE to television advertising in the United Kingdom is reflected by the ease with which the Television Bill became law last year. This Bill amplifies the original Television Act of 1954, and provides for, apart from organizational and financial stipulations, a code for advertisers. Television advertising in the United Kingdom takes the form of short inserts totalling up to 6 minutes per hour, slotted into the programmes at 'natural breaks', and the new Act strengthens the control the Independent Television Authority can wield over the contents of advertisement in the public interest.

The birth of the Television Act in 1954 was a noisy and contentious affair. It involved the breaking of the BBC monopoly and the introduction of private initiative and finance into the organization of broadcasting, and raised, as many people thought, fundamental issues of social policy. For all that remains to be done, however, the story of the first 9 years of Independent Television is a story of success.

It is true that in the summer of 1962, it seemed for a brief moment that the Pilkington Report<sup>1,2</sup> would rekindle these old fires of criticism and objection. That this did not happen is, I believe, because to most people the substance had gone out of the controversy. Independent Television had become an accepted part of our national life. After all, few of those melancholy predictions which were made at its birth have been

fulfilled. The 1963 Television Act puts into words what the Authority has regarded as its belief, that Independent Television is "a public service for disseminating information, education and entertainment" with the same rights and obligations as the BBC.

Without making any call on a licence fee or on any other public funds, but getting the necessary revenue entirely from advertising, Independent Television has succeeded in building up a popular, balanced public service which has spread over the whole of the United Kingdom.

Despite all the Jeremiahs, advertisers have not interfered with programme policies and programme decisions. They have kept their minds upon their allotted 6 minutes an hour. Sponsorship was, of course, never part of the system. Equally important, the opponents of Independent Television have been proved wrong in anticipating that the advertising itself would carry unspeakable evils. I do not say that even now everything is perfect, but few people would now quarrel with the contention that the techniques of persuasion used in television advertising in the United Kingdom have been generally reputable and intelligent. This has been achieved by a combination of statutory and voluntary disciplines.

Under the new Act, the Television Authority itself assumes more direct control over advertising, and a new code has been introduced, resulting from a thorough exchange of views and opinions with the Advertising Advisory Committee, the Medical Advisory Panel and the Postmaster General. There has been a steady improvement in the quality of advertising over the years and this process will no doubt go on.

Advertising in British television practice, as has been already stated, is entirely divorced from the programme content; indeed one of the rules of the

code specifically makes the point that there should be no suggestion that an advertiser has anything to do with the provision of a programme. Programmes, like advertising, on television are undergoing a process of change and it is the direction of this change that is interesting. What, in fact, are the growing points of television?

Television began as a medium of entertainment. Today, by any test, it is the largest medium of entertainment in all prosperous modern societies. It has not destroyed the stage, nor the cinema, nor the novel, nor sport as a spectacle to be watched, and no sensible person would want it to do so. It has not destroyed them, but what it has done is to outgrow them. It has become larger than they are, and now attracts far bigger daily audiences than they attract. This has not happened because television has developed some new entertainment form of its own. It has taken fiction from the novel, plays from the theatre, films from the cinema and sport from the stadiums. It has invented neither tragedy nor comedy nor suspense nor laughter. It has not really added a new dimension to any of these elements. It has just taken them over.

Where there are forms of entertainment which seem particularly associated with television — for example, serials and dramatic series — they really stem from the fact that television can count on the fidelity of a regular daily audience. I well remember the old film series *The Exploits of Elaine* — but *The Exploits of Elaine* cease to be a marketable product unless the customers are there once or twice a week to see it.

Of course, television has its own secrets of effectiveness, and its own methods of directing and producing, writing and acting. The smallness of the screen may be a limitation, but its intimacy is also an opportunity.

However, at the root of the matter, television scores because it is a triumph of distribution. Entertainment has reached the home at a cost so low that almost everyone can afford it. This ascendancy looks unchallengeable, because it is too surely based on convenience and cheapness. Only if television grew stale and self-exhausted would it be in serious trouble. It is for this reason — the very fullness of television's present exploitation of the accepted forms of entertainment — that one looks elsewhere for the growing points, the opportunities still to be grasped, the possibilities that are latent and the areas of advance. They are not hard to see, for in all of them television is on the move.

It is certainly on the move in current affairs, which I take as my first growing point. Television is now one of the main sources of information about the nation's

political life, its problems of foreign policy, defence policy, economic policy and social policy. I don't think for one moment that television has taken over from newspapers and the political periodicals. The printed word gives depth and perspective in a way that television can never hope to do. But television gives strong impressions, and can hardly fail to have a powerful influence on the way we form our opinions. Its life-like quality, the appeal to eye and ear, the vivid close-up of great men, are things the coldness of print cannot so easily achieve.

There also is the sheer extent of the impression made. Millions of viewers, perhaps a full half of the electorate, may see the party political broadcasts. Here surely is a remarkable reinforcement of the means for disseminating information, knowledge and understanding.

Not more than a tenth of the human race successfully practise democracy. There could hardly be a more difficult and testing form of government, and to make it work you must have an electorate sufficiently well-informed to make competent judgements over a range of problems that grow year by year in number and complexity. These judgements are not only of domestic matters but of involved international issues.

It also depends on moral qualities, of tolerance, good humour, and a modest willingness to concede that the other side also genuinely cares and may even have got things right. These are stern requirements when you consider our human frailties of passion and prejudice and belligerence.

Television has to see all this very clearly because its power is too great to be exercised capriciously. Current affairs programmes must *begin* in a determination to be fair, and neither the desire for a good story nor the temptations of partial advocacy should distort the process. Programmes do not happen. Someone makes them, and everything depends on these values of impartiality and fairness being accepted and applied by the programme makers. The Television Acts require this, and the Authority has a responsibility for seeing that it is so.

I think we can say that British television is fair and people will find all sides of a question more fully expressed on television than anywhere else, and that this is a notable gain for the democratic process. I add only that, like the price of liberty, the price of fairness is eternal vigilance. The Authority has the duty to be vigilant and we shall certainly be, though using commonsense and fairness in our own judgements.

The second main growing point, it seems to me, is the use of television in education in all its forms. The

Authority has recently set up an Education Advisory Council with Sir John Newsom as its Chairman. He is a man of immense distinction in the educational world, who has been much in the headlines because of the Newsom Report on education for the average or below-average young person.

It is worth recalling that this notable report had a good deal to say about educational television. For example, it recommends that local education authorities should regard television receivers as necessary equipment for the education of our children.

At the moment there are barely 8,000 schools in the United Kingdom equipped to receive television programmes produced by the two national services. This is admittedly an advance on last year when there were only 4,500, but this is not a very remarkable figure when you consider that we have in all some 35,000 schools.

Sir John's Committee also recommended that training colleges and university departments of education should, as a matter of course, include in their courses consideration of film and television as social and educational forces, as well as preparation for the appropriate handling of school broadcasts. I am not myself competent to judge in these matters; yet I cannot believe that this Committee of experienced and well-informed educationalists would have made such a recommendation if they were satisfied with what is being done at the moment. Television is for most

people in this country their main source of information about the world around them, and it must surely be given an increasingly important place in the formal educational system.

One of the main recommendations of the Newsom Report was the lifting of the minimum school leaving age from 15 to 16 years, and this recommendation has been accepted by H.M. Government. In making this recommendation, the Committee insist that the final years in the education of the average child should above all be "outward looking" and closely related to the world of work and daily life into which these children are shortly to emerge. I cannot think of any more valuable instrument for achieving this purpose than television.

Here, then are two important areas of national affairs in which television has surely an increasingly significant role to play. Two growing points to which we must increasingly direct our attention. There are, of course, a host of other problems. Television during the next few years is going to lose nothing of its excellence and momentum.

#### REFERENCES:

1. L. MARSLAND GANDER, 'The Pilkington Report—Its effect on British Television'—*Sound & Vision broadcasting*, Vol. 3, No. 3. Winter 1962.
2. MARY CROZIER, 'After Pilkington'—*Ibid*, Vol. 4, No. 1, Spring, 1963.