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Radio as an International Interpreter

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PROFESSOR STEWART:—Mr. Chairman, gentlemen of the Canadian Club. On hearing the rather alarming opening words of your chairman, all sorts of fears began to cross my mind of what might be coming, but I am gratified and thankful that the darker side of the record was not made public, even though they did contain a certain amount of suggestiveness. He told you that in the reports he had of me "Most of what I heard was good." Some time I must ask him to pursue that line of thought a little further, and find out what the balance of what he heard was like.

I, in turn, feel that I can say with great sincerity and emphasis that your chairman's successful career is not due to any inspiration of mine except, perhaps, to some very small degree. Rather is it due to that extraordinary energy and personal initiative that his name has been carried literally through all the earth and his words to the ends of the world.

Today I am going to speak as an educationist about what Radio can do, what it has in some degree already done and what it may do to a degree far greater than has yet been realized for the improvement of international relations.

First, let me speak of the sort of educational work that can be carried out through this new instrument: not every sort of education, but a very valuable variety which we need to define with care if we are to obtain the best from it. Radio offers, undoubtedly, the greatest opportunity for the wide spreading of knowledge. I say wide, but I do not

necessarily say deep, because I think we do a great wrong to ourselves in interpreting and understanding this instrument if we fail to realize its limitations as well as its powers.

Educationally, the function of a radio is that of an appetizer, the function of University extension work in general. It is not a substitute for systematic full time study at a University, but rather a stimulus and an aid to those for whom books are the only agency for higher knowledge which their situation in life permits. In other words, the function of radio is to stimulate a desire for knowledge, not to satisfy it.

I am going to speak of the possibilities of radio in special reference to the sort of education our age so badly needs: education of countries and racial groups in understanding one another. Not since the age of printing five hundred years ago has there been an advance comparable to this, but in order that we shall not make too large a claim, or expect too much of this invention, I should like you to carry yourselves back to the middle or late fifteenth century, when printing was still new, in about the same stage, in fact, that radio is today. About that time William Caxton set up his press in Westminster. He was turning out books of many sorts, not cheap, as we count cheapness, but marvellously so for the time, and one of his most frequent and inquisitive customers was Richard, Duke of Gloucester, the same, who as Richard III, was shortly to arrange the smothering of his nephews in the Tower. (I would not like to say that the sinister characteristics of that monarch were stimulated by his visits to Caxton, however.)

Now, I am thinking of the year 1480 when that senseless horror, the Wars of the Roses, was still a memory. Looking back on the ghastly civil strife from which they had just emerged, one can imagine with what enthusiasm might those who watched the operation of the new type have exclaimed: "This will so educate our public that nothing of the sort can ever occur again. This is going to reform the world."

But did it? Have books had such an effect in the last five hundred years? The question sounds ironic, even

cynical. The great war is just about as far in our past as were the wars of the Roses in Caxton's day. I just cite this as a warning not to expect too much of or be over sanguine about radio, but, at least, we may be able to use the disappointment of printing to learn how to avoid some of the misuses, and adopt some of the uses we failed to make of books.

Now, one of the greatest things that the radio has done, is to show speakers the value of time, and to teach them to be brief. As some unkind person has put it—you know just where you are when you turn the dial; even if you are one of a company, and feel that it must be borne to the end, there is no exasperating uncertainty about how long it will last. That in itself conciliates and facilitates attention.

A second benefit is that, the speaker, thus limited in time because radio time is expensive, tries to compress and summarize, whereas on a platform he might have been diffuse or even have repeated himself.

A third, and the most important factor in the educative value of the method, is the absence of distracting or distorting influences. The listener is by his own fireside, and not in a crowded hall. He is not looking at a scene with a more or less engaging gesticulating figure on a platform, a chairman and a crowd of faces in the audience. The argument, exposition, narrative or appeal is being executed, as the phrase goes, "Between him and thee alone". This ought to support very valuably the character of calm unbiased thinking. The case presented has to stand or fall by its own logic, its own reasonableness and truth, to which one is better able to attend in a quiet sitting room than in a tumultuous auditorium. It seems to me that in the old days the political speaker had developed to the highest degree the art of producing in his listeners the critical faculty. He reduced them by his eloquence and acting to a state of mental obliviousness in which they would accept anything he chose to tell them. Now what we have done by the radio is to deprive him of all these extraneous aids, and his appeal must stand by the force and cogency of his reasoning alone. Moreover he has not the generous editing of a newspaper of his own side to help him. What he has said, he has said, and thereafter nothing can help him.

Another thing that has cut down the eloquence of the politician is the notoriously conversational character of speaking which has been developed by Radio. I am not depreciating these other kinds of eloquence, but they are not suited to the technique of radio. There is nothing oratorical about radio. Very aptly its addresses are called "radio talks". It is a quality that belongs to a special art. An orator needs a special setting, a background; he often needs to use long and well balanced sentences, with shorter ones preceding or interspersed, so that there is an overwhelming and thunderous climax.

I am not undervaluing that sort of speech. There is a marvellous artistry in the performance of a Burke, a Gladstone, a Disraeli, a Macaulay, or, in our own day, a Winston Churchill, but that kind of thing requires the aid of sight as well as of hearing. There is so much a speaker can do by gesture, by facial expression, by talking his audience into cooperative action. He can use long, rolling balanced sentences of which you do not lose the sequence because he is there in front of you helping you to preserve it by his gesticulations. The artistic result is of fine quality, but you can't have it on the radio. Restricted to but one instrument, the manipulation of the tones and cadences of his voice, he must forego that particular sort of effect.

I felt that very strongly when I last listened to Winston Churchill on the radio some time ago. Here was the chief master of formal oratory in England deliberately abandoning it and adopting instead an easy conversational and almost affectedly casual style. It is yet another token of his extraordinary talent that he proved so effective in that style too. I listened to him with the utmost admiration because I was certain that he had every word written out before him, and yet, he paused effectively in the middle of a sentence as though thinking out the second part of it, and the result of thinking it out with apparent difficulty was that it always came out in the most exquisitely modulated English, perhaps, it was almost too fine.

Now these are qualities of Radio speaking that it is very important to note, for although it is remote from oratory, radio speaking is not remote from eloquence. The

good radio speaker, not haranguing you, but talking to you as if he were thinking out loud, exerts the charm of artistic conversation, which, with the passing of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was threatening to become a lost art, like the art of letter writing which used to mean so much. It would be a pity that it should be lost, perhaps radio will help to bring it back.

Now what bearing has this kind of instrument on international relations? Can we talk effectively and improvingly not only among ourselves, but to the United States? Can France talk to Germany, or Italy to Russia with any better effect by radio than by the older method of newspapers and diplomatic envoys?

Several difficulties suggest themselves immediately. In the first place there is the difficulty of language. How can a speaker in one language address another country. That particular difficulty is not hard to overcome. Every country has its linguists who can speak with grace and effectiveness in a tongue that is not their own. Harder to find is the ability to think along the same lines as your foreign audience. Remember it is not the interchange of professional diplomatists who will make allowances for each other or, at least, understand one another, that we have in mind. It is an ordinary Englishman speaking to French, Italian or German people in French, Italian or German. Even if he were allowed to do so; even if dictatorial nations did not forbid the tuning of sets to that wave length, or arrange programs to drown him out, could he speak effectively to such an audience? Could he think and express their type of thought as well as use the idioms of their speech? Some could, but they would have to be very carefully picked. They might very easily be the sort of well meaning Englishmen who went to Ireland to recruit in the early days of the great war, and of whom G. K. Chesterton, who went later, said, "I shall not dwell on their adventures." Here and there, however, will always be found somebody who has learned to think along the lines of his foreign listeners. Unfortunately they are very few at present, but I hope to see them developed more and more.

Perhaps, the greatest difficulty of all still remains to be mentioned. That is the word propaganda. I wish we were not so loose in our use of words. To most people the propagandist is someone who advances views in which they don't believe, but everybody who tries to advance any cause, be it the cause of better health or more education, is a propagandist. That, however, does not help. A foreign speaker addressing an audience on international affairs is at once discredited as an agent of his government, and people say, with a contemptuous shrug, "Propaganda," using the term in its most malodorous sense.

Even if the speaker is unofficial, but is speaking in a country where radio is government controlled they take it for granted that he is at least speaking under censorship, and that anything he says they can find in a blue book or in a speech by the Prime Minister. This I am sure is one explanation of the lack of interest shown abroad in the very excellent talks provided by the BBC. It is understood that the script has to be submitted in advance, and it is assumed that excisions or transformations are made to promote government policy. So, they say, it is like the German newspapers, or newspaper, for under the inspiration of Herr Paul Goebbels, they are practically one newspaper, and the Nazi government regrets that they do not find it interesting.

A suggestive case in this respect is that of the activities of the Italian radio artists at Bari, who are broadcasting in Oriental languages about the nefarious treatment of eastern peoples by their British and French overlords. Its object, of course, was to cause such concern for Palestine, Egypt, Syria and the Soudan, that Britain and France would be eager to be left alone and therefore willing to gratify Italian ambitions elsewhere.

But my latest information, from one but recently returned after a lengthy residence in Palestine, is that the alarm was excessive. The Arabs, he told me, to whom these broadcasts were addressed, regarded them as a huge joke. They knew Italy, none too favorably, and quite understood this was mechanized propaganda. But even then it is hard to suppose that the recent outbreaks in Syria and Palestine were not in some measure the result of this evidence of

Italian support. At least Britain thought so and the result was a series of counter broadcasts, which no doubt, were also the subject of much native scepticism. So far has this particular rivalry gone that it is sometimes called war in the air.

On the other side of the picture is that news that already in operation is a radio project aimed at the extension of the cause of peace. A word of cordial praise is due to those who have established in Boston a non commercial radio service for the advancement of international goodwill. Conscious of the danger to peace in the Latin-American republics, and of the resentment that has long been felt against the United States the promoters of this enterprise have directed much of their effort to peoples of Latin American stock. Expense, in such a cause, offers no deterrent, and the wisest philanthropic agencies, including the Rockefeller Foundation, have risen to the occasion. The Departments of Trade and Commerce are to be given weekly periods to explain United States policies that have been the subject of wilfull or accidental misrepresentation. Hitherto little noticed republics which have been more or less neglected because of their lack of commercial opportunity are now being flooded with programs whose aim is much higher than the mere sale of goods. Harvard lectures, in their own languages, are made available in a regular series to the people of Hayti, Nicaragua and Cuba. In short a peace diplomacy of the air carried out by those who feel that at least a trial should be made of the possibility of rousing interest for the greatest of all public causes as it has long been easy to rouse for the worst kind of public misdeeds. Naturally there will be those in Chile, Cuba and Brazil who will at once exclaim that this is just another propagandist move of the American exploiter. Difficulties of that sort will have to be overcome, and they can be by demonstrating by precept and practice that the charge is wrong.

But it is not only, or even chiefly, through discussions of public interest boardcast from country to country that mutual understanding may be improved. It is even more by sharing in one another's musical programmes, sport, jest, and whatever brings home to each the intimacies of

the other's life at home. That is why I feel that great care should be taken when our country is presented to others that no cultural aspect should be overlooked. What is vitally important is that in getting to know a foreign people we should at least include some knowledge of it on its best side. Anyone who has even the most primitive kind of radio set can, by tuning in on the CBC hear the finest in American music, and this has the very finest effect on Canadian-U.S. relations.

Some years ago I was permitted by the CBC to read correspondence from the Maritime provinces on the exchange of programs with the National Broadcasting Company. It was full of enthusiasm for the Metropolitan Opera and the concerts of the New York Symphony Orchestra.

I remember reading letter after letter, particularly from St. John, New Brunswick, expressing gratitude for the opportunity to hear what the writers called "This glorious music." Such selective service, revealing the higher cultural life of the American people, is an important advance in the agency of goodwill. It stimulates a new appreciation of a neighboring people's life and thought, so that sympathy is deepened with the deepening of respect.

Moreover does not the brotherhood of light entertainment, sport and jest tend to bring two countries closer together? Here at least there can be no suspicion of propaganda. There is nothing in it of the wooden method that defeats its purpose by a flattery that is easily seen through, or an obtrusive friendliness that is obviously part of a campaign. Jeremy Bentham said let men understand one another and it will not be long till they agree. I hope that is true.

At this point someone always asks me "What are you going to do about the mis-use of Radio, and if you have censorship how are you going to avoid prevention of free speech?" Others say that nobody should be allowed to express an opinion over the radio unless those who disagree are given an opportunity to deny it. That of course is impossible owing to the limitations of time. I have always myself laid down the principle that the function of a radio broadcaster on public affairs is not to tell people what they

should believe, but to take from their path some of the obstacles that prevent them from seeing the facts. His business is to explain what the facts mean rather than take any side in a conroversy.

With only fifteen minutes to nibble round a question you have no time to argue, and if you had time to get enough people together to argue the matter so that every side could be heard the result would only be confusion.

The job of the commentator is to ask himself the question, "What are the steps that have led up to the situation the lack of knowledge of which will give the average reader difficulty in knowing what it is all about. What historical supplements can I supply to fill in the background of the day's news, to connect up the links and leave the listener to make up his own mind?"

The commentator must discover what the audience should know about such states as Poland, Albania or Rumania to make clear to them what is behind the events on which he is commenting. No one is to be blamed for not knowing much about those countries. I know that most of us can find them on the map, if it is one of the more clearly printed ones, but as to what they are, what their history has been or how long there has been such a place as Poland, Rumania, or Yugoslavia most of us are rather in the dark. But without such knowledge it is impossible to gain a just appreciation of what is happening. It is therefore the job to deal with the background of the week's news so that they shall better know what it is all about. It is not his job to tell them what to believe—whether Chamberlain, Eden or Mussolini is right. His business is to make it less difficult to find their way through the press reports.

And what about censorship? Are we to say that there should be no supervision, no guarantee of any kind against injudicious broadcasting? That speech on the air should be absolutely free? I think not. No speech is free in that sense—from the platform, through the mails, in the printed book or newspaper or on the screen limitations of public order and public decency are imposed, and in the case of radio where the time is so limited and the audience so general, there is no doubt need of special care. But we

ought to be able to distinguish between mere ribaldry and the suppression of unpopular opinions, between safeguarding public morals or public safety, and serving the caprice of the party in power. As in other forms of publication no opinions intelligently and honestly held, provided they do not incite to violent or disgraceful conduct should be denied this means of expression. And if anyone pretends to see an insuperable obstacle in deciding where there is instigation to disgraceful conduct I answer that decisions as delicate as that have to be taken by the public authorities every day. Let us not fail to make full use of a precious instrument, either by magnifying difficulties which are real, or inventing difficulties which are merely an excuse for sloth.