

Television in Switzerland

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TELEVISION IN SWITZERLAND.

Some technical, cultural and financial aspects.

Up to now it was generally thought, both in Switzerland and abroad, that the introduction of television in this country was an impossibility, and the large sums spent on planning and technical research a waste of money. But even the worst pessimist — and there are many! — has to admit, that the whole question of television in Switzerland has reached a new and important stage of development with the message issued on June 4th by the Federal Council. This message, which is called "Financing of the experimental Swiss Television Service" and was laid before the federal councillors for study and approval, deals with all the problems connected with successfully running a television station. We are now going to outline some technical, cultural and financial aspects contained in this most interesting statement, so as to get a rough idea of what that future Swiss Television Service is going to be.

In autumn 1950, the Swiss Postal Administration appointed a "Television Commission" on behalf of the Federal Post and Railway Department. The thirty members of the commission were to study the technical possibilities of introducing television in Switzerland, by examining local conditions and taking advantage of experience gained by foreign television stations. Their first step was to get sufficient technical knowledge; so they got in touch with the U.S.A. and Great Britain, countries which were both able to help them by invaluable practical and technical information. The commission was impressed by the terrific success of television in the U.S.A., where a net of more than a hundred stations is supplying every part of the country with television programmes. A careful study of the B.B.C. Television Service gave the commission a good picture of the many difficulties to be surmounted when producing unsponsored and entirely non-commercial programmes. France has also got its own regular television service, though with a small number of subscribers, and last but not least, there were the encouraging examples of Holland, Germany and Italy to be considered.

Early this year the commission came to the conclusion that, as far as Switzerland was concerned, a well-planned and gradual introduction of television would be advisable. They see it as follows: first experimental transmissions for the technical planning of a television net, then two experimental stations to gain experience in organising and producing programmes, and finally a regular television service all over the country. It would be the task of the Postal Administration to cope with the technical side of such an enterprise, while the working out of suitable programmes would be left to the Swiss Broadcasting Corporation.

In the federal message it is made quite clear that there will be no question of television commercial programmes, and it says furthermore that "television can be a valuable enrichment of life if the programmes are maintained at a high cultural and ethical standard. The transmissions should be limited to only a few hours a day so that viewers should not be prevented from other occupations."

The appointment of a cultural committee, which would be composed by members of the Church, Art and

Science, Education, Press, Political Parties, Women Guilds, etc., was also recommended. They would work in close co-operation with the studio authorities and would act as a sort of advisory board. In principle, the town chosen for the prospected television experiment of three years' duration is Zurich for the German-speaking part of the country, and either Lausanne or Geneva for the "Swiss Romande".

What has been done so far? Many visitors of the 1939 "Landi" may remember the first television demonstrations which caused a lot of interest at the time. Unfortunately, the outbreak of the second world war set a temporary end to any further development, and it is only two years ago that work was taken up again in a Franco-Swiss experiment on Mount Salève near Geneva. The success was promising, and work has been going on ever since. The latest progress in the matter are public demonstrations which were held in Lausanne a few weeks ago. Members of the Television Commission and of the Swiss Broadcasting Corporation were invited to be present, and their opinion was that the picture televised had reached, without being perfect, a highly satisfactory standard.

To come back to the federal message, we have to say something about the most important part of it all, namely expenses. What is it going to cost, and who is going to pay? In their report, the Television Commission have estimated the cost for an experimental period of three years at 4 million S.Frs. This is a very considerable amount under the circumstances and might even be quite underrated. The report also suggests that the costs should be shared as follows: Postal Administration S.Frs. 900,000, Swiss Broadcasting Corporation S.Frs. 900,000, Government S.Frs. 1,500,000, which leaves an uncovered amount of S.Frs. 700,000. It is hoped that the deficit will be covered by subscription fees and grants from further public bodies, for instance the Cantons. Subscription fees during the experimental period would be in the reach of 50 S.Frs. per annum. This amount would have to be increased in case of regular television transmissions.

But, however big the task and the possibilities of failure may be, the interested circles are hopeful and look forward with courage and pride. For, as Dr. Fritz Ernst stated in his speech on occasion of the 25th Anniversary of Radio Basel, "television in Switzerland belongs to the very near future!"

Ernest Andres.

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