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THE SWISS SHORT-WAVE SERVICE

REPORT ON A CONFERENCE TO THE NOUVELLE SOCIÉTÉ HELVÉTIQUE BY MR. JOEL CURCHOD

Mr. Joël Curchod, Berne, gave a talk to the London Group of the *Nouvelle Société Helvétique* on 20th January at the Swiss Hostel in Hampstead. The President, Mrs. Mariann Meier, introduced the speaker not only as Director of the European and Overseas Services of the Swiss Broadcasting Corporation, but also as a member of the Commission of the Swiss Abroad and the Special Commission on Information on both of which she had the pleasure of working with him for several years.

The speaker opened his talk by explaining that he would address the audience on a particular kind of radio service: the short-wave service for listeners abroad. This he did all the more gladly because, in a civilisation marked by its powerful information media, short wave radio was one of the most dangerous of these media, one of the most misused and one of the least known. Or, rather one of the least understood. And especially with this aspect of the subject in mind, adapted the title of a Sillitoe book and called his talk "The loneliness of the long-distance radio".

"Radio in general, and television even more so, constitute a sociological phenomenon without precedent. Almost everyone has his own transistor, and there are few people with no opinion on the subject of television, on the entertainment it provides, and on the social, political and cultural role it plays. Programme staff appearing on television, just like disc-jockeys on the radio, have become stars. Telecommunication satellites have intensified international co-operation. Programme exchanges are now a matter of daily routine. A television programme threatened with suppression is front-page news all over the world. Millions upon millions of words are written about television and radio by all the thinkers and all those who fancy themselves to be thinkers.

"But little is said about radio transmissions directed abroad. Especially in peace time. And yet they can be heard everywhere, coming from all directions, speaking in all languages. They are the most aggressive form of radio, but at the same time—fortunately or unfortunately—the most cautious.

"Once again it is 'the loneliness of the long-distance radio'. Unlike medium-wave and ultra-short-wave broadcasts, short-wave transmissions are intended to cover long distances. They can travel almost around the earth. This capacity means that from the outset short-waves have been used for utilitarian telecommunication purposes such as international police messages, maritime navigation, telephone links and so on, as well as for radio programmes directed abroad. This latter field has been taken over almost completely by governments. They use short-wave broadcasting as a means of disseminating information and propaganda at the international level. This situation fully confirms the observation of the late lamented Louis Armand, the French Academician, when he wrote: *'The information media are misappropriated by those who have the means to control them for their own profit. This is the whole problem of publicity, private or political, which is concerned both to pay for being heard and to control the information media to prevent others from being heard. It is also the problem of monopoly, including state monopoly.'*

Relative expenditure on foreign broadcast services

Mr. Curchod continued: "Yes, short-wave radio directed to foreign countries is—whether one likes it or not—ideological radio and, therefore, being an information medium, usually a state monopoly. This is the case in the United States, where the Voice of America spends year in, year out, tens

or hundreds of millions of dollars it is the case in China and the Soviet Union, where broadcasting accounts are not yet published; it is the case in Britain, where BBC broadcasting for abroad costs over ten million pounds a year; it is the case in West Germany, where the *Deutsche Welle* and *Deutschlandfunk* absorb some two hundred million marks a year. Lastly, it is the case in Switzerland, where the Short-Wave Service of the SBC—the Swiss Broadcasting Corporation—costs some ten million Swiss francs a year. In fact, the Swiss Short-Wave Service (or Swiss Broadcasting Corporation's European & Overseas Services) is the least expensive of all the stations of comparable size or bigger, which corresponds very well to Switzerland's limited ambitions and to its traditional sense of economy."

The speaker said that with the BBC, Britain had given a distinguished example to the world of mass media, and had done it in keeping with her own tradition of looking at the world of people and things. The BBC short-wave services—and in particular of the extraordinary role played by the French and German language programmes during World War II—had been a model for every short-wave service in the world. He went on: "Being tonight on British soil, I cannot fail to pay tribute to all those who, with Lord Reith, Sir Hugh Carleton Greene and, today, Mr. Charles Curran, have built up the prestige of the BBC and carried it far and wide.

"Radio reporters" said Mr. Curchod, "ask a great many questions; radio directors are called upon to answer a lot of questions. (Not to mention criticisms, always more numerous than compliments.) And there are all sorts of questions. One important question which I have to answer quite often is: 'Why does a small country like Switzerland have such an important short-wave service?' Here I can best answer by quoting what we wrote in

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the 'World Radio-TV Handbook' a couple of years ago:

Live examples of listeners

"The need to speak to listeners beyond the frontiers of Switzerland first became apparent in the 1930's. At that time it was thought advisable, above everything else and irrespective of how the increasingly dangerous international situation would develop, to set up and maintain an immediate and permanent valid link with the hundreds of thousands of Swiss citizens living in other countries. Thus the SBC's European and Overseas Services carried out the task assigned to them, but soon it also began to attract the attention of non-Swiss listeners who today make up more than ninety-four per cent of our audience."

The speaker then went to ask who these "audiences" were. (Which made the loneliness greater.) Mr. Curchod gave some examples of the audience of the broadcasters even describing a few of the people listening to the Swiss Short-Wave Service.

"First, a young man of twenty-two, a law student at the University of Mexico. He has been to Europe once, visiting Spain, France, Switzerland and Italy. His stay in Europe made a deep impression on him. He is concerned about international political problems and considers that only by comparing different sources—Mexican, American, European—East and West—can he form a free personal opinion, based on reality. For this reason he listens to the Spanish programme of the Swiss Short-Wave Service at least twice a week.

"Next, a Swiss living in Argentina, the director of a big Swiss firm in Buenos Aires. Every evening at eight o'clock, before going out for dinner,

he switches on his transistor and tunes in to Switzerland. 'In a few minutes', he says, 'I am well informed about important developments in my country and can get an idea of Switzerland's position and possible actions in the international field.'

"Thirty-four Swiss have signed a letter sent to SBC's Overseas Services from Kinshasa. They want to hear the sports results as soon as possible, because for them the football championship is at least as interesting as if they were still in Switzerland.

"Peking, August 1966. The Swiss Ambassador has returned from a visit to Hanoi. There, a senior official at the North Vietnamese Foreign Ministry told him: 'The people of Hanoi very often listen to the French and English transmissions of the Swiss Broadcasting Corporation's European and Overseas Services. Reception is good and the programmes are much appreciated because of their competence and moderate tone.'

"Another voice, from South Vietnam this time. He teaches French and is in the habit, he says, of listening to Switzerland at least three times a week. Why? Because he needs to improve his French and prefers—for personal reasons—not to listen to broadcasts from France. Thanks to him, Vietnamese school children are learning songs by the Abbé Bovet and Emile Jacques Dalcroze."

Mr. Curchod said he could give many more such portraits; one for each listener. Which brought him to a question he was often asked and which was impossible to answer precisely: "How many listeners does the Swiss Short-Wave Services have throughout the World?" "The geographical dispersion of the audience prevents the service from carrying out scientific surveys. Their only possible course was to extrapolate from the number of letters received—taking into account the statisticians' different opinions. The Canadians seemed to have gone quite deeply into this matter of estimating the number of short-wave listeners. "They maintain that each letter per year corresponds to 120 listeners. The Swiss Short-Wave Services get over 20,000 letters a year, so on the basis of the system adopted by Radio Canada there should be two and a half million listeners. Is this figure too big or too small? Once again, it's difficult to say, as there is no way of checking its accuracy. At any rate, the audience is able—in some respects, at least—to make up for this 'loneliness of the long-distance radio' which is the overseas broadcasters' normal lot."

Who are the most regular listeners?

Mr. Curchod told his audience that in 1970, Britain came second on the list of countries from which the Swiss Short-Wave Services receive

messages. In fact, letters from Britain amount to 11% of the total number they get. The United States came first with 24% of our listeners' mail. West Germany is level with Britain at 11%. From Switzerland itself 7%, particularly from foreign residents and tourists and family members of Swiss living abroad. Then come Canada and France with 3% each, Australia with 2½%, Japan 1½%, Cuba 1%—that means over two hundred letters a year—Czechoslovakia and Algeria 0.6% each, and so on.

As to the language in which correspondence is kept, about 50% of all the mail is in English, 24% in German, 7% each in French and Portuguese, 5% in Spanish, 3½% in Arabic, 2% in Italian, and 1½% in Esperanto.

The speaker said that the Swiss Overseas Broadcasting Services had recently extended their analysis a little further, and the results showed that about 40% of our listeners—the ones who write to them—were townspeople; half of their listeners seemed to be of above-average education, with only 2% revealing any lack of education.

Statistics for listeners in Britain

As regards Britain, general conclusions reached from the investigations of their press and public relations service were that 60% of the listeners had come across the Swiss short-wave transmissions by chance, while 25% had found programme times and wavelengths in the specialised press. Reception conditions were generally considered good to very good throughout the year, which was not the case elsewhere. Short-wave propagation, of course, was very uncertain. Short-waves went a long way, a very long way, but they were liable to meet with accidents en route; sun spots were their enemies, some topographical features too.

"Short-wave listening undeniably requires an effort. It's not enough to press a button and casually turn a knob. To get satisfactory reception of the information which is transmitted daily from Switzerland, it's best to know all the possibilities available. No frequency—or wavelength—provides permanently good reception" said Mr. Curchod.

"That story clearly illustrates the extent to which the Short-Wave Service is misunderstood: yet another example of 'the loneliness of the long-distance radio'."

Next the speaker tried to explain the difficulty of finding out what listeners, known and unknown, expected of the Swiss Short-Wave programmes. To this end, a new type of programme was developed which was introduced in May 1970. It was not easy to reconcile the irreconcilable, nor to discover what was unknown. The dual basic mission had to be borne in mind:

First, to strengthen the ties between the Swiss living abroad and the mother country; Second, to help maintain the Swiss presence throughout the world. In addition, a common denominator had to be found for the various extremes, such as the educated and the illiterate; developing countries and industrialised countries; Swiss living abroad temporarily and the descendants of Swiss people who emigrated several generations ago, etc.

"We took stock of the facilities for information and culture" the speaker went on, "and defined our specific role in relation to them. Needless to say, we took into account the moral and material limits of Swiss national ambitions. From this analysis and the resulting synthesis, priorities emerged, and we were led to concentrate our efforts at the demographic level in favour of the most isolated at the geographical level in favour of the most remote places; at the technical level on specific targets; at programme level on two different but complementary aspects: first, through our daily transmissions, a continuous flow of information; second, through the production of "transcriptions", a contribution to Switzerland's cultural 'image'.

Programme policy

"Information, particularly political information", Mr. Curchod explained, "brooks no delays and tolerates no outside censorship. So it was obvious that SBC's European & Overseas Services should make information their strong

point. What appears obvious today, however, has not always been so. Not so very long ago, the general situation was very different. The absence or scarcity of other means of information and entertainment in many parts of the world and the characteristics of a more traditional Swiss emigration, together with other factors, led the Swiss Short-Wave Service in the course of its thirty-odd years of existence, along the stony paths of what was called 'supplementary information, embellished by programmes where the main effort was directed to re-creating for a typical listener (the Swiss emigrant in search of his past after many years abroad) and to maintaining the picture of a Switzerland as similar as possible to the country he had left and which he was seeking again, sometimes passionately. And the result was a sort of fairy-tale in cardboard pictures — *imagerie d'Epinal*—very appealing and picturesque, to be sure, but rendered obsolete by the rapid evolution of modern times".

"We must not forget that since 1945 some sixty countries have achieved independence; that they have their own organisations, also in the fields of telecommunications and information; that in the industrialised world, divided into two blocks, the radio stations have attracted the cold war and then carried it to the Third World that transport and communication facilities have created a new scale of prospects and values; that the transistor has brought radio receivers and gramophones to the bush, the desert

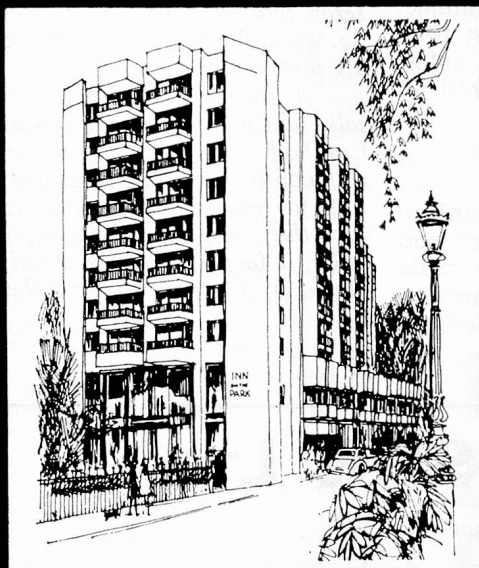
and the jungle; that the magic window of television has spread throughout the world; that the nature of Swiss emigration itself has changed profoundly, with many of our compatriots leaving the country today for limited periods to work with industry or Swiss technical co-operation, government-sponsored or privately.

To preserve Switzerland's standing

"So the Swiss Overseas Service chose information. Choice is always somewhat painful because it means giving up something, but it has the immense advantage of enabling us to make the most out of what we have decided to do. The Swiss Short-Wave Service has thus chosen conscientiously without megalomania, but without false modesty either, for after all, as the former Cabinet member, Paul Chaudet, has written:

"... the aims to be achieved, whether economic or political, are intended to maintain this country's place and influence at every level where it has gained incontestable material and moral positions—not with an egoistic will to survive or in a spirit of pride, but with the firmly fixed idea of giving Europe and the world—keeping everything in proportion—the services justified by the experiences of its history, its attachment to independence and its vocation of solidarity."

Mr. Curchod told his audience that he had been sharply taken to task one day—in a friendly way—by several compatriots abroad, members of one



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of the most intelligent Swiss communities abroad, the Swiss Study Group in Paris. They had said to him: "It's really incredible. Here in Paris, where over thirty thousand Swiss are living, it's almost impossible to hear the Swiss radio, medium-wave or short-wave. We are not informed!" That was correct in a certain sense and regrettable too. Like his friends in Paris, the speaker deplored the fact that technical contingencies prevented the Swiss Short-Wave Services from filling this gap. On the other hand, it could be said that these same compatriots had access to the international press; that they were less than an hour away from Switzerland by air and no more than six to eight hours by road; that the chief Swiss newspapers were in the kiosks on the morning of issue the similarity or even identity of certain forms of civilisation, thought, attitudes and actions, the common frontier, the constant exchanges in every field—there were so many moderating factors in this alleged lack of information. If one remembered that French radio and television were available to the Swiss in France, it could even be said that, in a sense, they had the same sources of information as many French-speaking Swiss living in Switzerland. On the other hand, the further away the country and the greater the difference in language, customs and ways of life, the more important it becomes for Swiss radio to provide a daily picture of Switzerland and of the world as seen from Switzerland.

Information to the Swiss abroad

The speaker then came back to the particular problem of providing information for Swiss people abroad. At that moment he spoke as a member of the Commission of the Swiss Abroad of the NSH, as well as Director of the Swiss Short-Wave Service. On this subject of information for Swiss abroad, there was far from being a consensus of opinion as to the correct policy. Efforts were now being made to trace the broad outlines of this problem, to work out definitions, to determine specific needs and so to plan effective

and valid responses to these needs. The Swiss Foreign Office and, in particular, M. M. Jaccard and his staff, the Secretariat of the Swiss Abroad in Berne, were now acquiring experience in the publishing field.

"They are aware of the considerable efforts made in some Swiss communities, whether at embassy level or that of the Swiss societies. 'The Swiss Observer' of London and the contact bulletin published by the Tunis Embassy, for example, have a particularly high reputation. Indeed, the fact that they are talked about in Berne is in itself a remarkable tribute!

"But the overall problem is more complex than it appears. And to find a solution it is not enough to have the constitutional bases laid down in Article 45A. Who is to be given information? What sort of information—general or specific? How is it to be done? These are the big questions which have to be answered. The Swiss Short-Wave Service, for its part, sees itself as a sort of permanent court of appeal for general information and—within its own sphere—for specific information. Something like the stand-by group of firemen. Because they have the flexibility and effectiveness given by immediacy; because they have no desire to act as a substitute for other sources of information, culture and entertainment—press, radio and television, Swiss and non-Swiss, which can satisfy certain needs better than the short-wave service can."

Mr. Curchod repeated that it was not possible to adopt this policy without sacrificing something. But the vast majority of comments received from listeners expressed satisfaction with this basically informative programme. And the new policy had almost been dramatically vindicated by the international events in which Switzerland was involved in 1970.

Future plans

He continued: "With regard to transcriptions, we produce tapes and records which are supplied to radio stations and special groups. At present, SBC's European & Overseas Services

are producing two series of transcriptions. The first is called "Musica Helvetica". There will be 48 programmes in the first series. These albums reflect music in Switzerland in various forms at various stages of its evolution. For example, the Musical Past of Switzerland, Contemporary Swiss Music, The Swiss Jazz Scene, Swiss Folk Music, Swiss Conductors, and so on. These records will be offered to radio stations in the United States, Britain and elsewhere. They include a commentary in English, so each station can broadcast them in the form of a programme Made in Switzerland for English-speaking audiences."

Another project to be started on very soon, is the recording of "round table" discussions on Swiss political issues. Tapes will be sent free of charge to any Swiss communities interested. To begin with, it is planned to hold one "round table" per month, in German and French alternatively. It is hoped that this new facility will help compatriots abroad to make themselves better informed.

Concluding his excellent talk, the lecturer regretted that he had been able to cover no more than a few points, and that he would also have liked to deal with a subject which was for him a daily reality: *political* information.

He then invited questions and terminated by thanking the audience for their attention. "Tonight", he said, "thanks to you, the loneliness of the long-distance radio" has not been a heavy burden. But when it does get heavy sometimes, I repeat to myself the words of Ramuz, which have become almost a motto in the Short-Wave Service: "*Tu t'obstineras, tu seras têtu, il faut que tu sois têtu.*" So, we in the Swiss Short-Wave Service are always obstinate."

A lively discussion followed the talk, and many were the questions Mr. Curchod answered satisfactorily and with competence. The President thanked him for coming to London especially for the purpose of addressing the NSH, a fact which was greatly appreciated by Council and members alike.

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