

## SOCIAL RESEARCH AND THE FILM

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In recent numbers of *Documentary News Letter* there have been numerous references to the apparently *ad hoc* policy for Ministry of Information films, and several references to the apparent failure of the Films Division to check up on what it is doing. Moreover, recently the Select Committee on National Expenditure stressed the need for the Films Division to consult the Home Intelligence Division of the Ministry on the sort of films and treatment needed, before embarking on the making of propaganda films. It is clear that the short-term function of the Films Division is to affect public opinion. The *only* test of its value is, therefore the effect of its films on the people who see them: the only justification of its output, a demonstrable need for every film. The Films Division has the immense responsibility of producing films with effects favourable to the continuation of the war and our victory. These films may either have a general effect on temper, temperament, determination, etc., or deal with specific subjects.

It is therefore interesting to find that the Films Division of the Ministry appears to have no adequate machinery to provide it with much evidence, either by observation, interpretation or questionnaire, on the influence its films have had and are having. Apparently the only substantial data available to the Division are reports from cinema managers.

It is not worth elaborating for readers of this publication the difficulties which would face any cinema manager who, while carrying on his ordinary jobs, attempted without training to observe the reactions to specific points, including the sequences of short films, sandwiched in full-length programmes. And it is the detailed breakdown which is so important in checking on propaganda. A small incident in a film may produce unforeseen effects. For instance, *MISS GRANT GOES TO THE DOOR* (best liked of MOI shorts), apart from terrifying some rural spinsters and widows was incidental propaganda for a 'people's war'. The whole solution of her problem depended on her getting a revolver (from the fortunately placed corpse). The sight of this untrained hand wielding the weapon, however ineffectively, at once played on the secret wish to have some weapon of protection in times like this. Trivial examples of this sort can be multiplied. And it is really amazing that any informed propaganda unit can have produced for *general distribution* a film like *CALL TO ARMS*, which was calculated to alienate many sorts of working-class or other feelings. The Films Division with its highly intelligent personnel, in its very high building, tends to be easily out of touch with the rather simpler reactions of industrial Lancashire and rural Somerset. One of the reasons why Social Research has come into being is because, under modern economic and administrative conditions, it is difficult for any 'high-ups' to keep in close or sympathetic touch with 'low-downs'.

But if the Films Division of the MOI needs social research, the whole film industry needs such machinery at least as badly. For in wartime, war becomes by far the most important item in our lives, and the subject of many feature films. The effect of these films, extensive and expensive as they often are, may often prove greater, if less direct, than short or five-minute documentaries. *THE LION HAS WINGS* was, for instance, a powerful contribution towards Chamberlainish complacency: *LET GEORGE DO IT*, a detailed analysis of enemy espionage, has given rise to persistent and sometimes hysterical rumours that broadcasters, ranging from Vic Oliver and Charlie Kunz to Edward Ward and C.B. Cochran, have been arrested (interned, shot, hung) for sending out code messages over the radio.

So much for the general considerations. I am suggesting with diffidence that the Films Division is operating in a vacuum at present. Can it *prove* that it is not doing more harm than good? I am also suggesting that the commercial film industry and the independent documentary concerns must consider and accurately measure the effect of their films, not only in the terms of aesthetics, box office and techni-colour, but also in terms of morale, behaviour and social conduct.

Having, I hope, broadly stated the case for research on film effects, film people will ask what sort of potential machinery exists for checking, and how accurate is it?, Here I must ask that my answer be

treated with the utmost caution. I am heavily biased, because for some three years now part of the energies of Mass Observation have been directed to studying film effects. And as I can find exceedingly little offer definite British research on this subject, except for occasional local questionnaires, and Sydney Bernstein's annual popularity polls, I am forced to start out rather from our own experience. I should mention that we are already adequately employed!

The only thorough film research ever undertaken was sponsored by the Payne Fund, through the Motion Picture Research Council, in the USA, 1929-32, Many of the best sociologists and social psychologists in America took some part in producing the twelve volumes of research results. But these were concerned exclusively with children, and there is nowhere adult data for comparison. The method used in the survey was almost entirely that of direct questionnaires to children, probing hundreds of problems, such as the most popular film scene, film attendances, the effect on conduct and emotional life, relation of films and crime. It was found that, sometimes, even a single picture had the effect of altering children's attitudes, e.g. BIRTH OF A NATION caused antagonism towards negroes; ALL QUIET ON THE WESTERN FRONT, objection to war. A high proportion (66 per cent) of children imitated their favourite film stars in emotional and sexual circumstances. Children who went frequently to the cinema were found to be less favourably disposed to school, home and other normal environments than those who went only occasionally. In brief, it was established that the film exerted an immense influence on American children.

From these investigations it has generally been assumed that the effect on adults is similarly immense. *But no scientific evidence on this subject exists.* In a small way, Mass Observation has attempted to assess the influence of the film on several occasions. While we would not, under any circumstances, claim a general validity for our results, several different studies, separate in time, place, subject and method, have given pretty similar results. For instance, in March, 1939, we made a study of one thousand voluntary ARP wardens in a typical borough, and among other things sought to discover what propaganda had influenced them to join ARP. In their view, the following was the relative importance of the different propaganda channels in determining their attitude to ARP:

	<i>Percent</i>
Press .....	26
Talk and friends .....	24
Posters and displays .....	19
Radio .....	11
Leaflets, pamphlets and books.....	10
Meetings .....	3
Films .....	1
Miscellaneous.....	6

Shortly after the declaration of war, we asked our nation-wide panel of voluntary observers (not a typical cross-section of Britain) to ballot on what they considered the main influence in determining their general attitude to the war and their understanding of the events leading up to it, with the following result :

	<i>in importance</i>
Friends and 'own opinion'.....	1st
Press .....	2nd
Radio .....	3rd
Leaflets, pamphlets, etc.....	4th
Posters and displays .....	5th
Films .....	6th

The numerous subtle *indirect* impacts of film probably add up to all important total; in a fashion survey a couple of years ago we found Joan Crawford was fourth most important factor in determining the headwear of Cockney and Lancashire girls. But *direct* effect of films specifically presented as propaganda or with the object of producing an immediate effect, would seem to be small when compared with the generalisation often made by interested parties. Further research into this subject is clearly of importance.

It is easier to make continuous studies of newsreels than of documentary films, and we have watched what we believe to be a pretty steady decline in the prestige, never high, of newsreels in the past year. At the end of 1939 just under two-thirds of all persons asked said they liked newsreels, and expressed sentiments distinctly favourable to them; by August, 1940, only just a quarter of those questioned held this point of view. In 1939, 12 per cent spontaneously criticised newsreels for having no news; in 1940, 35 per cent spontaneously made this criticism. These results have no *absolute* validity, but a comparative value.

The investigators, the question, the areas and class proportions were the same each time; and the questioning was spread over several weeks in order to avoid the dominant influence of any one newsreel. A whole wealth of criticism was revealed, some of it very unfair to the Newsreel Companies. At the same time, we have found repeated cases where the newsreels have alienated people by their political bias, by their treatment of emotional topics, by the commentaries (which are often unsympathetic to ordinary people), and have shown by numerous indications that they are sometimes out of touch with the feeling of the moment and even, sometimes, with the permanent feelings of housewives or labourers.

A newsreel at the beginning of the present blitz preceded pictures of bombed London (presented in a manner hardly calculated to elevate the provinces) with:

Britain's Day of Prayer  
More Canadian troops arrive  
'Dead' Guards VC is prisoner-of-war  
New Zealand band plays popular airs for London  
US ambulances for Great Britain  
Duchess of Kent visits a hospital

The prestige of newsreels seems to have fallen most sharply among middle-class people and among men; there is some parallel evidence that the prestige of Ministry shorts has not risen lately, and that they are more appreciated among the middle-classes than among the working classes (the greater part of the population). Incidentally, people who see favourable reviews of Ministry shorts often find difficulty in locating the cinemas where they are showing, and our own investigators have wasted much time and energy in this way.

So far we have been dealing mainly with verbal responses, *public* opinion. If we are to understand fundamental attitudes, to the film or anything else, we must penetrate below the superficial words. The film in its environment, the cinema, offers almost ideal material for the student of *private* opinion. The large numbers of people provide adequate quantities of types, of all classes, ages and sexes. The darkness provides the privacy in which people can react as individuals and even perhaps hiss a Minister they would only dare glare at in the flesh. Moreover, films provide an immense range of human situation, and present to the audience a great variety of emotional problems.

Watching audience responses in cinemas gives the same sort of information about what is really going on in people's minds as we get from intimate war diaries, or dream studies. For instance, while public opinion polls and press letterbags showed a heavy increase in Chamberlain's popularity after the beginning of the war, and while this popularity was superficially maintained until within a few days of his resignation, newsreel observation showed a steady and accelerating decline in favourable audience response whenever he appeared on the screen, though it is the 'done thing' to be loyal to your Prime Minister in public, especially in wartime. Similarly, direct opinion testing would always show a big hand for the King. But in the early months of the war newsreel (and other) studies showed that his popularity was at a low ebb.

Since the bombing of Buckingham Palace the King's popularity has risen, as instanced by one-seventh of appearances applauded at the outbreak of war to over one-third of appearances applauded since the blitz. The Duke of Windsor, who is not often seen, has the highest score of all, maintained throughout the war. Before the Dakar incident General de Gaulle had a 100 per cent favourable response and, in more than half of our observations, was clapped for over five seconds; mass-observers await with interest his next newsreel appearance.

Clearly, much depends on the methods of measuring audience response. We have devoted a good deal of effort to developing an accurate Measure; but as well as being accurate, it must also be practicable under the special conditions for observation, which are far from a laboratory.

Observer variation, the rapid sequence of film events, the difficulty of getting scripts as a check on observation, and the darkness in which the observer must write and record, are all difficulties. We have tended, therefore, to observe a few films in detail, rather than many films in brief.

Six main types of audience response are observed, each response graded into categories according to the approximate extent of response amongst the audience, and the duration is stated in seconds. Testing with different investigators has shown that this method provides information which is reasonably reliable for practical purposes. In studying LET GEORGE DO IT, for instance, with six investigators working separately, recording audience response to fifty sequences in the film, the degree of consistency was striking. Moreover, in this as in many other investigations, we found a striking similarity in the responses of widely different audiences.

The emotional background for laughter seems, on our detailed studies of films, music hall and pantomime, to be remarkably stable, but the detail of treatment for successful jokes on familiar themes is very changeable, especially under contemporary conditions. The living stage comedian is immediately sensitive to this and can modify his jokes accordingly from evening to evening. The film comedian, or the documentary film producer who wants to make the Point with a touch of humour, is at a disadvantage here in having less contact with public opinion, and therefore more need for a well based understanding of probable trends. To refer once more to LET GEORGE DO IT the 'topical' jokes in that film were not popular and received little more than half the volume of response given to non-topical jokes in the same sequences. The conditions for their particular topicality had changed while the film was being made and distributed. We have made five separate investigations into joke reactions, in Blackpool, in London music halls, in a last Christmas pantomime, in a Sunday newspaper competition and in Formby Films. In every case, much over half of the successful laughter points came from themes of ill-health, deformity, sexual abnormality, or potential death (including war) situations. This was as true of Blackpool in 1937 as of a music hall in 1940. Even in 1937, in Blackpool, war wits running only a little behind ill-health as the most successful joke subject.

I might fade out this article by mentioning an analysis we made of the replies received by the *Sunday Dispatch* (courtesy of film critic Moore Raymond) in a competition where they asked people to name which 'fade-out' of a film they liked best. Usually, press information of this sort is of little value, because those who reply are influenced by what they think the paper will or won't like its indicated by its published attitudes on the subject. In this case there was no attitude or indication of opinion to influence the readers; they simply wrote on postcards their ideas of the perfect ending. The most popular fade-outs were these, in this order of frequency:

THREE COMRADES. Two of the comrades, already dead, beckon the third to join them. Arm in arm the three comrades march through the skies.

DARK VICTORY. The heroine walks slowly upstairs to die bravely and alone.

GOODBYE MR CHIPS. Mr Chips in his old age murmurs the names of the boys that he has known, as he dies.

WUTHERING HEIGHTS. The hero climbs the hill, faithful to a tryst with a lover who is dead;

A TALE OF TWO CITIES. Carton says 'it is a far, far better thing'. etc. The camera pans as the guillotine knife falls, and shows the clear sky. Then a scripture text.

MODERN TIMES. Charlie Chaplin and his girl walk off down the road together.

QUEEN CHRISTINA. The exiled Queen stands at the prow of her ship, like a figure-head, looking into the future.

LOST HORIZON. The hero struggles back over the mountains to the dream city of Shangri La.

Here we see down into the heart of stolid, shy, old British emotion. The tragic ending wins every time, provided it looks into the future and brings a message of heroic hope. It is because Winston Churchill feels like the readers of popular Sunday papers that he is able to call out so much in British people that Chamberlain, Halifax, or Attlee could never command.

On the basis of our own experience, plus the existing techniques available from propaganda testing and market research, and the Payne Fund studies, it would seem to be a relatively simple matter to set up an independent bureau, recognised and supported by all the interested parties. This bureau would be concerned entirely with research, establishing and using accurate and agreed criteria, observational, verbal, statistical and qualitative, to measure the effects of all sorts of film, and to predict the needs of existing and potential film audiences. Its job would include:

1. Keeping a regular check on opinion trends about films in general, different types of film and their prestige in particular.
2. Reporting on public reaction to all relevant films, especially shorts, which are not measurable by any box office index.
3. Discovering what symbols and subjects are suitable or require film treatment at any time. (e.g. At the time of writing Indian troops are a particularly popular symbol not being used on the films; acute boredom is caused by shots of arms workers, the history of the crisis before the outbreak of the war, and the Duchess of Gloucester inspecting things, subjects repeatedly used.)
4. Providing information on the varying situations which produce 'undesirable' effects, the general trend of reaction to war themes, etc. (e.g., from September, 1939, to August, 1940, there was a steady 17 per cent disliking all themes connected with the war unless humorously treated, a higher proportion objecting to horror shots of any sort).
5. Producing general factual criticism, from the public opinion point of view, on all propaganda films; and providing comments on the elementary social factors which seemed to have escaped the attention of the industry (e.g. films such as CALL TO ARMS and MR BORLAND THINKS AGAIN have been generally distributed, though their application was particular. Mr. Borland was concerned mainly with silage, a word that was not explained until the last minute of the film).

### **Postscript on 5-minute films**

Fifteen official MOI shorts, and 2 GPO films released through file MOI, have been the subject of study. The failure to advertise these official, films was found to be a weakness, and lately the failure to show them. For instance, at six out of seven cinemas in Watford, and two out of three in Streatham, recently, the 'shorts' could not be seen at all. By the end of August a survey showed that 59 per cent of Londoners had seen and remembered something about Ministry 'shorts', and that of these nearly four liked them for every person who disliked them. This is a much higher degree of popularity than that enjoyed by newsreels, but it has not been wholly maintained. There has generally been a much higher degree of popularity and response from middle-class people than from working-class people (sex differences are very slight). This seems to derive largely from the essentially upper and middle-class attitude of many of the films. This started with the original *Careless Talk* films, in each of which the spy was a worker (barman, café proprietress, pub-crawler), while in two of them the gossipers were working class, though in only one was the cast, as a whole, working class. The hero of one of these films, a factory scientist with a beautiful large house is killed by the idiocy of a factory worker. The hero of another is a rich young airman; his fiancée lives in a luxury flat. This tradition has been maintained, though not to the same extent, in the later five-minute 'shorts'; Miss Grant and Miss Know-all are ladies with large houses, while the working-class population of CALL TO ARMS was really a joke, and repeatedly, where working-class characters are represented favourably, they are not represented faithfully. It is interesting to notice that the most remembered and commented on feature of any film was Priestley's commentary to BRITAIN AT BAY; he provides a bridge between middle and working classes.

Another factor which seems to have led to the decline in intensity of interest is the lack of continuity or apparent theme-sequence in the films from week to week. Several films were criticised for vagueness, e.g., SEA FORT, which was very puzzling; CALL TO ARMS and YESTERDAY'S OVER YOUR SHOULDER, which had direct appeals for service without explaining clearly how or where to offer it. The lack of humour has also been a striking feature of many of the films; only four have made any real attempt to exploit humour, and in two of these mass taste has been considerably misjudged. Finally, the stressing of stars in some of the films has detracted from the feeling of reality upon which the success of such

films largely depends; Stanley Holloway, Robertson Hare, Emlyn Williams, Dorothy Hyson, and so on, turn 'shorts' into rather vague and incoherent minor-feature films.

If we classify the films into 'short stories' and 'strict documentaries', and compare the observed audience response of the two main types, we find a consistently higher degree of response to the documentary; approximately one-eighth of response to the documentaries is unfavourable, whereas rather under a half of the response to the story films is unfavourable.

Roughly, this means that bad sequences in short stories really irritate people, while bad sequences in documentaries are not so likely to annoy. But, on the other hand, a short story, which takes into account the other considerations, can be more successful than the documentary in arousing audience interest, and especially personal identification which is associated with probable definite action. The power of a purely documentary film to make people change their habits is doubtful. But here is a subject which vitally requires research. What is the *effect* of an MOI film like FOOD FOR THOUGHT in terms of actual increased economic cooking and intelligent dieting? This type of effect could easily be tested, and we hope to undertake such tests in the near future, but really it is the job for a special organisation working directly with film interests.

*Documentary News Letter*, vol. 1, no. 11 (November 1940)