LISTEN FOR VICTORY

Meanwhile, Cecil Graves was busy working on the BBC's output. There was a case for saying that this was the more important side of things anyway. In a sense, the buck stopped with Graves and the programming; the average listener (and theoretically viewer, should television ever become a thing again) was hardly likely to judge the Corporation based on its newly rationalised departmental corporate structure and highly efficient organisational ethos. Their image - the public image - of the BBC was always going to be based on its end product: the radio service and the programmes thereon. Graves was faced with dilemmas ranging from the seemingly petty - whether or not Harry Korris' popular comedy and variety show "Happidrome" had a place in the Forces Programme alongside the religious service - to the nakedly existential, as newspapers from The Times down to the Prescott and District Reporter actively questioned the necessity of such programming at all, if not the very existence of the medium. "This constant radio listening is rapidly destroying our powers of original thought." claimed the latter in January 1943, in an article that ultimately recommended that radio listening should, like food, soap and fuel, be rationed.

This idea did not catch on. The Ministry and the Corporation themselves both knew perfectly well just how important the radio was during a protracted world war. Not only was it vital for up-to-the-minute information propaganda purposes, it was almost the only thing keeping up the morale of an embattled country surviving on powdered egg and coupons. There were still shows and newsreels at the cinema, but even if you could still get to one it was still a matter of you going to it, whereas the BBC, via your radio set, instead came to you. In many cases, the BBC managed to achieve both at once, as when they made a star of C. H. Middleton.

Mr. Middleton, as the entire country referred to him, had had a series of what were then called "radio talks" on the subject of gardening since 1931, which even by 1940 was being listened to by an astonishing three and a half million people up and down the country, from seasoned horticulturalists to sad urbanites who could only experience things like lawns and rhododendrons vicariously through the radio. Before long, the Ministry of Information were getting involved, alongside the Ministry of Agriculture, and Mr. Middleton became the voice - and, via an animated caricature, occasionally the face - of the Dig for Victory campaign. Possibly he would even have remained a star after the war, had he outlived it by more than six months, but his place in history is assured as not only the first of many celebrity gardeners, but one of the very first celebrity anythings, other than just plain broadcaster - someone not just recognised or celebrated, but famous - a brand in his own right - for his expertise at an ordinary job. A whole new concept had been invented.

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Mr. Middleton's success with "Dig for Victory" was downright inspiring to both Graves and the Ministry, and the Corporation and Government continued to work closely together for the war effort, doing all they could to maximise manpower. Or, increasingly as the War went on, womanpower. As the supply of men in their twenties to forties diminished over the course of the forties, the focus of programming increasingly shifted across to Rosie the Riveter. Fortunately, Graves and the BBC had Janet Quigley in their corner as the Corporation's unofficial Minister for Women, and she was keen to stress that "no single factor is at the present moment more important for the war effort than getting the call-up of women to run efficiently and happily"††. To this end, she oversaw regular "talks" aimed directly at women, often with her own input into the content - not at her own insistence, in fact she preferred to defer full control to the talker, but simply because of her own expertise. Quigley's influence would ultimately lead to the creation of Woman's Hour shortly after the war, of which she is still considered essentially the creator despite not joining in an official capacity until five years into its existence.

Aside from digging for victory, other campaigns the Government were keen to have the BBC undertake included the Fuel Economy Campaign, for which the Ministries of Information and Labour had an extensive plan that they brought before the BBC as a fait accompli. What they called "practical hints on fuel economy" would seeded throughout programming from housework magazine Kitchen Front all the way down to Children's Hour, and even in the continuity announcements. Particularly during blackout hours, just to rub it in. The BBC took it under advisement and ultimately ran a somewhat more subtle version of the campaign.

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