IT’S BEING SO CHEERFUL AS KEEPS ME GOING

The most popular programmes during the war were, inevitably, the News. Running a close second was its exact opposite. While first priority was hard information about the War, or as hard as could be safely and accurately broadcast, second priority was something, anything, to take the population’s minds off the damn thing. Necessity being the mother of invention, this resulted in the pace of programming speeding up, so the listener couldn’t dwell or be distracted by the harsh war-torn powdered-egg reality around them. The most famous such programme, to the extent that the very name has become iconic, was It’s That Man Again - ITMA - a half-revue, half-sitcom starring Tommy Handley and often extrapolating its absurd plots from the latest war-related news. Handley was the (relatively) calm centre for comic chaos with a host of recurring characters, most armed with catchphrases: from alcohol-soaked Colonel Chinstrap (“Don’t mind if I do”), Hattie Jacques’ voracious Sophie Tuckshop (“But I’m alright now”) to glum housekeeper and striking example of nominative determinism Mona Lott (“It’s being so cheerful as keeps me going”). ITMA was appointment listening before the term was invented, with tens of millions tuning in on a regular basis, famously including King George VI himself and family.

Not as well remembered post war, but almost as important during it, was Monday Night at Eight. Specifically conceived as an exercise in “pure radio”, Monday Night was a cross between a variety show and a sort of World War Two equivalent of The One Show, consisting of several items, none allowed to run above six minutes, stitched together for an hour to appeal to everyone. The items included (but were by no means limited to) the very first ever radio quiz (“Puzzle Corner”); various running comedy sketches, including the proto-Munsters “The Dooms” (with Alfred Marks and Hermione Gingold) and the wildly popular monologues of Richard Golden as Old Ebeneezer; an interview slot where the subject could be almost anyone as long as they had six minutes’ worth of interest in them; anecdotes and shaggy dog stories from the likes of Arthur Askey; five minute bursts of light music; a bit where Kenneth Horne has someone on whose birthday is that week and gives them five minutes to do what they like; and at the end, a detective serial, initially in the Inspector Hornleigh Investigates series (replaced with Dr. Morelle when Hornleigh’s actor S. J. Warmington was killed in the Blitz).

Finally, slightly closer to the “news” end of the spectrum than the “entertainment” one, was The Brains Trust, wherein a panel of intellectual heavyweights of considerable calibre - including the likes of Violet Bonham Carter, Isiah Berlin, Jacob Bronowski, Aldous Huxley, C.S. Lewis and even Will Hay, an astronomer as well as a comic - would answer random questions put by members of the public. The questions could, initially, be about almost literally anything, from nature trivia (“how

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does a fly land on a ceiling?”) to basic quantum physics (“what is the fourth dimension?”) or aesthetics (“what is the most beautiful phrase in the English language?”). Initially they had questions on current affairs (i.e. the war), politics and religion too. Those subjects did, of course, have a tendency to result in heated argument, but it didn’t take long for the BBC to realise that enraged bickering was entertaining in its own right - a genuine breakthrough for the future of entertainment. In fact, the whole programme was unrehearsed and unscripted - far from unheard of in those days, of course, but the deliberate absence of polish was relatively innovative.

Inevitably, the Brains Trust was wildly controversial. Some accused it of vulgarisation, in the way it inevitably favoured volume over content. Others, mostly in the Government and the Church, complained about religion and politics being included in the programme at all - with such effectiveness that they soon weren’t anymore; by 1943 Controller of Programmes Basil Nicolls was painstakingly sorting through the postbag to find and remove anything with the potential to cause “irritation in Parliament”, while religion was right out. This appeased the Cabinet and the Archbishop of Canterbury, but then the show came under attack from other quarters for having become dull. Still, ratings remained healthy throughout, with almost 30% of the listening public tuning in by the end of the war and the show making a successful transition to television by the fifties.

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