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# LISTENING TO YOUTH

## A New Kind of Group Discussion

(Written for "The Listener" by  
JAS. F. McDOUGALL)

IMAGINE tuning in to a National station one night and hearing the voice of your grocer's boy discussing sex education, or your neighbour's bobby-sox daughter arguing with her friends the pros and cons of "pick-up."

Readers of the interview with Mr. Boyer, Chairman of the Australian Broadcasting Commission, printed in a recent *Listener* would learn of the freedom and frankness of the Australian "Forum of the Air." These, like the BBC series, "To Start You Talking," were and are primarily addressed to organised listening groups. But the Australian discussions are addressed to adults, these British ones were aimed at youth roughly between the ages of 16 and 20.

A copy of reprints of some of these "To Start You Talking" discussions, which, according to references in English journals, caused a small sensation in England in 1943-44, has just reached New Zealand, together with an introductory essay by Charles Madge, of Mass Observation fame, and some chapters on the preparation and following up of the series.

### No Time for the Expert

The BBC had been running talks series to youth off and on since about 1937. Some had been aimed at organised listening groups, some just at youth in general. Two things, however, were soon discovered: one, that these could not be given in a peak listening period; two, that the straight talk given by the expert just didn't go across with youth. Broadcast debates which would be "models of democratic controversial exchange" were tried, but youth just regarded these as phoney. Some of the BBC scouts, however, were struck by the quality of the free discussions in schools and clubs among the more vocal boys and girls. Out of this original impression the idea grew and the series was planned for putting youth itself on the air discussing problems which fell within their own personal experience.

The BBC took the risk again and the series "To Start You Talking" went on at a peak listening hour—8.10 to 8.30 on a Wednesday evening. From the statistics at the back of this book we learn that the greatest number of groups organised by Youth Clubs, Service of Youth Organisations, etc., actually listening was 44—say 800-1200 listeners. But the BBC Listeners' Research Department estimate by the end of the series was that each broadcast was being listened



to by 4,000,000 eavesdroppers over the age of 16, 95 per cent. of them outside the target area.

### Topics and Technique

The idea was something more than merely to have a few young people read a debate written by "youth experts." The script was to be written by the young people themselves. But "written" is a misnomer for the actual process employed. What the director of the series did was to send out talent scouts to the Youth Clubs in search of vocal youth who were representative of different views and experience, were intelligent, and possessed reasonably distinguishable radio voices. These were then brought together and given some time to settle down and get to know one another. Then a preliminary informal discussion was held on the subject chosen, the main rule for subject being that it should be a problem falling within the experience of youth.

Here are the discussions printed in this volume:

"Youth states the Case for Having Some Say in Matters of Public Business that Affect Young People."

"What is meant by All Men Being Equal?"

"Only One Living Room."

"When Should We Be Treated as Grown-up?"

"Money to Burn."

"Wilful Damage."

"Scrounging and Stealing."

"All Out for a Good Time."

"Learning About Sex."

Of these "What is Meant by All Men Being Equal" was the least popular; the reasons given were that it was too unreal, too academic.

A specially written dramatic interlude stating the problem is usually read first, the chairman then leading the discussion out and keeping it to the point, by a filling of predetermined "buckets." The

"buckets" for "Wilful Damage," for instance, were (a) Comments on the problem in terms of personal experience; (b) Why do people commit this offence? (with reference to personal experience); (c) What can be done about it? Sometimes a guest expert would be present, a magistrate in "Wilful Damage," a doctor in "Learning About Sex"; for each programme in which four or five young people would broadcast a dozen or so were brought together at the preliminary discussion. Two reporters were present at these early discussions and every aside, laugh, and response went down along with the actual debate.

### Some Statistics

The script of the actual "To Start You Talking" broadcast is prepared from the transcript of the preliminary discussions, the editors' and producers' aim being not to censor these discussions, but to mould them into radio fare, getting juxtaposition of experience and ideas, placing "clashes," laughs, changes of emotional tension, seeing that each viewpoint is fairly represented and that the freshness and spontaneity of the original discussions is kept in a script perhaps half of the length of the original debate.

As the title of the series suggests, the aim was to stimulate discussion among listening groups. A careful check was kept by the BBC on the success of each broadcast. After each programme and discussion, a reporting form was filled in by the club leader and sent to the Central Committee for Group Listening who passed on comments and criticism to those responsible for the programmes. Each leader supplied also a report on the discussions which followed, and these show that the discussions achieved what they intended to achieve—they started people talking.

Here is the analysis of the nine broadcasts (44 groups):

Name of Broadcast	Did it Hold Attention?			Did Good Discussion Follow?			
	Yes	No	—	Yes	No	Fair	—
For Having Some Say in Public Affairs	34	9	1	34	6	4	0
What is Meant by All Men Being Equal?	13	2	5	14	4	0	2
Only One Living Room	34	2	0	31	2	3	0
When Should We Be Treated as Grown-up?	32	2	0	31	0	3	0
Money to Burn	30	2	0	28	4	0	0
Wilful Damage	30	3	0	23	0	8	2
Scrounging and Stealing	29	0	0	24	0	4	1
All Out for a Good Time	29	1	1	26	4	1	0
Learning About Sex	26	0	0	24	0	2	0