

# WHEN HOUSEWIVES PUT THEIR FEET UP

## Sidelights on a Listener-Research Survey

Written for "The Listener"  
by HELEN WILMOT

"DO you think your wife would mind answering a few questions about radio programmes?" I asked the man who was mowing the lawn.

"Oh, I don't know, but you can try," he replied. "But if you ask me what I think . . . ! Most of the stuff they put over the air nowadays should be banned; and the way some of those announcers carry on, trying to be funny! If I had my way I'd stop the lot of them."

"Well, I'm afraid we only want the housewife's opinion to-day," I said, "but maybe we'll ask the menfolk another time."

I passed on to the house, wondering what sort of a reception I would get after this outburst. I needn't have worried. The woman of the house was a quiet little thing to look at, but she, too, had decided opinions about broadcasting. She just loved *all* the programmes, and didn't know what she would do without the radio. She really listened too, for she could answer all my questions intelligently.

Passing on to the next place I shuddered to think of the arguments which the radio must cause in that household.

"**L**ISTENER Research" (as carried on in the BBC and reported in the *New Zealand Listener* of November 8) has been done in New Zealand, but from the advertising angle. Apparently some big advertisers on the Commercial stations, being anxious to know how their programmes were liked and what influence they had on sales, asked a go-ahead advertising agency to conduct some research for them. This they did by means of a housewives' questionnaire. A team of women, of which I was one, was selected to interview the housewives and to find out their reactions to the programmes being provided for them.

We were given a questionnaire to fill in for each interview, general instructions on how to approach people, and then assigned a street or two to cover each day, doing about 40 interviews a day. We were also expected to classify the homes as "A," "B," or "C," according to the income-group they appeared to be in, "A" being above £500 per annum, "B" between £500 and £300 per annum, and "C" below £300.

### "Her Second Husband"

It proved a very interesting assignment. Despite many misgivings at first as to how the public would treat this intrusion on their privacy, I was pleasantly surprised at the helpful co-opera-

tion of women in general. In spite of the awkwardness of being caught at the washtub or the sink, or in the middle of polishing the floor, they were almost invariably kind.

I was also surprised to find out just how much the radio meant to the average woman—one woman told me the radio was "her second husband!" And what decided opinions they all held about the programmes presented to them! Most housewives were glad to air their opinions and I was sorry my questionnaire was limited to a fairly narrow field. I would have liked to let the programme organisers know what their listeners thought of their efforts.

Each interview was a little adventure—it is quite exciting to ring a strange doorbell and wonder just who is going to open the door.

Sometimes it was a dear old woman who would say, "Yes, I'd love to answer your questions, dearie, though I'm afraid I won't be much good at it. You should ask my youngest, he knows all about the radio. But come in and sit down while we talk, you must be tired." And in between my questions I would hear all about the grandchildren and their doings.

### They Asked Me In

Once it was an harassed housewife who was struggling with mountains of dishes—"Four extra to dinner, and they've left me with all the washing-up!" Another time a woman who was putting some braid on a blazer and wanted my opinion as to whether it was straight or not. They both asked me in and said "You can ask me the questions while I get on with my work—I haven't any time to waste!" And then ended up by giving me a cup of tea while they told me just what they thought of *Big Sister*.

Once I was called upon to give advice on a knitting pattern, and fortunately it was a pattern which a friend of mine had had trouble with, so I knew all about it. This woman always knitted between 10 and 11 in the mornings so that she could "rest her legs and listen to the serials."

Another time I had an intimate doorstep conversation with a woman who was very worried over her son, who had been a P.O.W. and wasn't settling down very well.

One attractive young woman said to me, "I've been married twice, and had four children; I've had some ups and downs and I think I've learned a bit of

what life is all about—and I'd like to tell some of those radio heroines where they get off! Snivelling and groaning round because of some man or other—why can't they make the serials more about real people and cut out the histrionics."

Of course there were the one or two who sneered a bit and gave you to understand they were above answering mere questionnaires, but they were few and far between, thank goodness. Just as you were feeling thoroughly crushed, at the next house you could find a kindly soul who had "just made a cup of tea. Come in and we'll answer your questions over it."

### Sidelights on Housing

A door-to-door survey such as this threw a very interesting light on the housing situation. There were many "B" class people living in "C" class houses, and thankful to have a roof over their heads. When I began questioning one girl she said, "I'm sorry, but we can't have the radio on much; you see, it would wake the baby," and she asked me in to see her home—one room, about 12ft. by 12ft., a double bed in an alcove, a sink and a small stove in one corner, a fireplace in another, a few chairs scattered round, and a sleeping baby in a bassinette in another corner. And such a lovely baby, too, and a fine young mother.

In some houses which opened straight off the street, and must have been built by the pioneers, one found highly-polished streamlined furniture with chromium fittings, and frilled curtains drawn over the old-fashioned window panes. While other houses, which had once been mansions of 12 to 15 rooms, were now rabbit-warrens of the "self-contained flat, share bathroom" type, and I got hopelessly lost trying to find a front-door.

To nearly all the "C" class homes and most of the "B's" the radio meant the Commercial stations, and the radio was on all the time. Some of the "B's" and all of the "A's" abhorred the Commercial programmes, but as my questionnaire was tied to advertising I couldn't investigate their likes and dislikes.

### "A ZB Person"

One woman, who was quite friendly, said, "Oh, my dear, I never listen to the Commercial stations, but you should try my neighbour in the top flat, she's a ZB person!" I wondered if the radio had been the cause of a first-class feud!

However, the Commercial station fans had plenty of opinions to offer. They loved the programmes with the personal touch—the quizzes had first place in their affections, and after that the request sessions, incidentally most of the



"... always knitted between 10 and 11 in the mornings so that she could rest her legs and listen to the serials"

"C's" enjoyed my questionnaire: they thought it was "just like the quiz programmes" on which, apparently they had a secret ambition to shine.

Many mothers said, "Oh, you should have the children here to answer your questions. They've always got their ears glued to the radio. I often wish the stations would close down while they get their homework done."

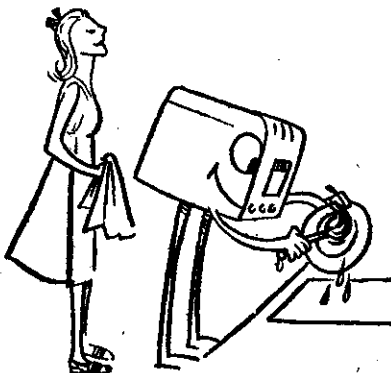
The old folk, too, loved the serials. For them listening was so much easier than reading, and if they were a bit deaf they could always turn the radio on louder.

### Those Serials!

Many of the Commercial fans resented too much advertising—it annoyed them to have any one product thrust on their attention over and over again; but if they liked a serial they thought it only fair to listen to a little of the advertising. And those serials! "Give us something out of real life," seemed the universal cry. "I can't stand that woman," many of the housewives said, naming a well-known radio heroine, "she's so good. If only she'd put a foot wrong occasionally she'd be ever so much more interesting!"

I began to think that the programme organiser and the serial producer would do better if they came a little nearer to earth. They seem to under-estimate the critical faculty of their listeners. Just as the trend in literature is towards realism, so in radio, people apparently want stories about ordinary people like themselves.

Of course this survey on which I was engaged only touched the fringe of the problem of discovering what listeners really want. But it convinced me that a Research Department set up in New Zealand similar to that of the BBC would produce some interesting results.



"Her second husband!"