Broadcasting in America

MANY different systems for controlling and financing broadcasting are in existence throughout the world to-day, ranging from that adopted by the B.B.C., who rigorously exclude advertising, to the system favoured in America. In the latter country the revenue necessary for the maintenance of the various broadcasting services is universally derived from advertising sources. No license fee for listeners is charged, and though this system may on the surface appear an almost ideal one, yet on consideration its numerous drawbacks are apparent. The following is the condensation of a striking article in "Modern Wireless" which very scathingly condemns the American system.

MOST countries throughout the world have adopted a system in which the listener pays directly for the programmes, which are then organised by some independent body, usually the State. In America, however, the average citizen has a horror of anything approaching a Government monopoly, and worships commercial competition. This characteristic, which seems to be peculiar to inhabitants of America, is probably the keynote of their unique system for establishing and maintaining broadcast stations.

Subject to fairly broad regulations, almost anybody can broadcast in the United States, and there are hundreds of stations, entirely lacking in uniformity of technique, power or purpose. Some are small affairs putting out only a few watts, others are much larger than even the high-power Daventry station in England.

Most large cities possess several. Some are municipal, some commercial, some philanthropic, and some religious.

Advertising as a Means of Revenue Condemned

As one might expect of America, the commercial stations predominate. As with many other enterprises, a too complete liberty led to something approaching chaos, and a few years ago a nearer approach to the unified system used in England was set up by the National Broadcasting Company, which now operates through two networks of stations stretching from Atlantic to Pacific.

Generally, one has the choice of two programmes, of N.B.C. standard, by listening to the nearest station on each network. There is also the Columbia Broadcasting Company, which works in a similar manner through a chain of high-power stations linked up by land-lines.

There is no license fee or tax of any kind on receiving sets, so at first sight it might appear that listeners do not contribute to the programmes they hear. Many of them probably imagine that they do not. But as broadcasting in America is run on a commercial basis, and as commerce is not a form of philanthropy expecting no reward for its labours, it is clear that somebody pays.

The broadcasting company is paid by concerns whose goods it advertises by means of the programmes. As a result of hearing the programmes the listener is fired with a desire to purchase these goods, and a proportion of the money he pays for them finances the programmes. As no firm would advertise merely to increase his sales to the point of paying for the advertising, it is clear that the listener actually pays more for his programmes than they cost; the advertisers pocketing the difference.

Admittedly the enhanced sales lead to reduced prices, and it is a nice little problem which listeners must decide for themselves whether the things they buy cost more because they are advertised, or less.

APART from this question of who pays for the programmes, the advertising system shows itself in the nature of the programmes itself. The fact that broadcasting is advertising in America does not always mean that advertising is so obvious as in countries where it is not allowed. There are concerns who put on programmes and rely on the excellence of the entertainment to incline the listener favourably towards them.

There are also the other sort who are determined not to let even the most butterfly listener be in any doubt as to what they want to sell. There is the sandwich system, in which numbers by the Gaspar Orchestra alternate with the readings of letters from various movie stars and pugilists ascribing their success entirely to the smoking of Gaspar Cigarettes.

This method is so obvious that a switch-over to another station can be effected at an early stage of the proceedings. Then there is the more ingenious type of programme in which the items are chosen to bear some relation to the product which it is desired to put across. For example, the announcement of the number "Mighty Like a Rose" will be followed up with the information that Rose Leaf Soap, which, as all our listeners know, creates a complexion superior to that of any rose, may be obtained at all drug stores for a dime.

This type of propaganda may also be easily detected, and if necessary eliminated. There is, however, one class of entertainment in which advertising is incorporated so cleverly that it is necessary to hear the most of it before identifying it.

It consists of a cleverly worked out short play or sketch which appears quite genuine until near the end, when the climax is unexpectedly supplied by an application of the advertising medium. The great detective, for instance, unerringly unmasks the criminal by observing on him a smudge of Peach Skin Face Powder ("there is a druggist in every block who supplies it for 75 cents") which the murdered heroine, being a woman of discrimination, used.

With all this advertising through the medium of the microphone, however, it must not be thought that most, or even a large proportion of it, is of a direct nature. The radio advertiser must consider the intimate personal relationship between the radio announcer and his hearers. The announcer is an invited guest in the home, and he must not transgress the social amenities by taking advantage of the listeners' hospitality. If he breaks the bounds of good taste with injection of direct sales argument he weakens his appeal. He then places himself on the level of the merchant who stands on the doorway and exhorts passers-by to purchase his goods.

Perhaps the most serious drawback to American broadcasting is that programmes which are provided solely as a vehicle for advertisement must naturally be designed to reach the largest public, and that public is the one that listens negligently to the jingle of a popular fox-trot. The more special audiences, which are interested in literature, drama, classical music, symphony orchestras, and lectures, are neglected by the wise advertiser. Thus, from the very start, the advertisement type of programme is severely limited.

"We should do well to emulate the Americans' keenness on 'big business,' but we should at all costs keep it out of our radio entertainments. For us to give up our broadcasting licenses would be to sell our birthright for a mess of microphone pottage."

Unique Broadcast

AT the opening of the Lille Wireless Exhibition M. Plouviet, who is in charge of the Lille transmitter, made a balloon ascent, and when on the way to Belgium and at a height of 7500ft. spoke by telephone to M. Dehorter—"Le Parleur Inconnu"—at his home near Paris. The conversation was broadcast by the Lille station. Before the termination of this successful transmission M. Plouviet sang a song, the accompaniment of which being played by a studio orchestra in Paris.