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# The “Socially Useful” in Public Broadcasting: Between Idealism and Utilitarianism – the Griersonian Element in a Tradition

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## SUMMARY

*The paper contains a discussion of the concept the socially useful in connection with broadcasting and especially in relationship to public service broadcasting. Tracing the concept back to John Reith's influential book *Broadcast over Britain from 1924*, written on the background of the author's experiences in establishing the BBC, the paper introduces a less known source for the establishing of the kind of standards that have come to be linked to the idea of broadcasting programming as socially useful activity in the person of John Grierson, pioneer of the British documentary movement. The paper makes a comparison of the underlying social philosophy of the two Scots, claiming that Grierson's role may have been underestimated when taking into the account how the documentary film practices of the BBC can be traced directly to the influence of the British documentary movement of the 30s and 40s.*

Key words: media history, film history, documentary, public broadcasting, socially useful content, BBC, British documentary movement

At a recent conference, a concept kept turning up while discussing the tightrope walk of modern broadcasting between the popular and the educational: that of *the*

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*socially useful*. This article is an attempt to frame the concept within a historical context by invoking two names central to the idea of “the socially useful” in the media: the Scotsmen John Reith and John Grierson. Both names are central to the idea and development of public broadcasting, although Reith, for many reasons, is the name that first springs to mind while discussing this subject, the main reason being his role in the establishing the British Broadcasting Corporation as the international model for public broadcasting. While acknowledging Reith’s fundamental (and well-recognized) contribution to the institution of public broadcasting, I will address the question of how the British Documentary movement, represented above all by John Grierson, came to influence public broadcasting as an instrument for “the socially useful”, by referring to the philosophical and theoretical underpinnings of that movement.

Apart from the shared first name and nationality, John Reith and John Grierson appears as two very different representatives of 20th Century social thought. While John Reith was an engineer with little theoretical philosophical schooling and politically clearly conservative, John Grierson held a degree in philosophy from the University of Glasgow and had embarked on a career as an academic with a scholarship to the University of Chicago, before turning to film. Politically, he was clearly of the left, with strong impressions from the early Scottish labor movement and at certain periods affiliated with the British Independent Labour Party (ILP).

### **John Reith and the principles of broadcasting as a public service**

In 1924, after having served half a year as the newly appointed General Manager for the newly formed British Broadcasting Company, John Reith summed up his experience as well as his recommendations for the future of the BBC in the book *Broadcast over Britain*. This book became, in many ways, the manifesto of the idea of broadcasting as a public service. Asa Briggs, in his *The History of Broadcasting in the United Kingdom* (1995) has summarized the four main principles of public broadcasting as stated by Reith:

#### **1. Non-profit**

Although the British Broadcasting Company had been established partly in order to coordinate commercial interests in the new medium, Reith made it clear that “The company is not out to make money for the sake of making money” (Reith 1924: 57) With the profit motive eliminated, it also became clear that continued

financial backing from commercial interests would be out of the question and the Company would have to look for other sources of revenue.

## **2. National coverage**

This principle underlines the *national* aspect of the mandate – if radio was to be regarded as a public service, it should be available to *everyone* in the UK, regardless of where they lived. This was a distinct break with the way broadcasting was developed in the United States, where the profit motive would lead to large geographical differences in the dissemination of radio stations.

## **3. “Unified control”**

In Reith’s usage this functions as a euphemism for “monopoly”, although Reith actually defended the word “monopoly” in *Broadcast over Britain* – mainly on technical grounds and in connection with the national coverage principle. In his memoirs in 1949 he was even blunter about “the brute force of monopoly”, claiming that this reinforced other fundamental aspects of what the BBC represented in broadcasting: public service, a sense of moral obligation and assured finance. (Briggs 1995:217)

## **4. The maintenance of high standards**

This, of course, is what by many is understood by “Reithian” – as illustrated by these sentences from *Broadcast over Britain*:

As we conceive it, our responsibility is to carry into the greatest possible number of homes everything that is best in every department of human knowledge ... It is better to overestimate the mentality of the public, than to under-estimate it” (Reith 1924: 34)

This statement is characteristic for Reith’s attitude towards taste, an attitude that came to make the adjective “Reithian” synonymous with “elitist” and “paternalistic”. There are clearly echoes of 19th Century concerns about the inherent danger in the taste of the lower classes, as expressed by for instance Matthew Arnold in his influential *Culture and Anarchy*.

The legacy of John Reith is to large extent based on this fourth point and may be summarized as the notion of the early BBC as *paternalistic* towards its audience, an attitude dominating for a very long time after Reith himself had left the organization in 1938. Andrew Crisell points out that this must be seen in the light of the

idea – as expressed by Arnold – that in order to save modern democracy, it would be necessary to elevate the educational and cultural level of the masses:

Thus, what Reith and the BBC were actually positing was a ... notion of democracy, based ... on considerations that were more than merely quantitative: for the aim was to open up to all those who had been denied them by a limited education, low social status and small income the great treasures of our culture. (Crisell 1997:29)

A similar, but definitely more elaborated idea of education, taste, class and democracy, will be found in the thoughts and life work of John Grierson and the British documentary movement.

### **John Grierson and the British documentary movement**

Since the general history of the British documentary movement is less known outside the community of film historians than that of the genesis of the BBC and the concept of “Reithian” broadcasting, it might be useful to give a short outline of this development. In 1924 John Grierson, having completed his degree in philosophy at the University of Glasgow, left for the United States and the University of Chicago with a Rockefeller scholarship to study immigration and social policy in the United States. After a year in Chicago, where he was influenced by Walter Lippmann’s ideas on public relations and propaganda issues without accepting his conservative ideology, he moved to New York and journalism with a newfound enthusiasm for the film medium. Here he worked as a film correspondent for several newspapers in addition to being involved with films work, such as editing the English language subtitles for Sergei Eisenstein’s *Battleship Potemkin* for its run in American movie theaters in 1926.

In 1927 he returned to England, where he approached Sir Stephen Tallents, head of the *newly* formed Empire Marketing Board (EMB), one of the early examples of modern government publicity organisations and managed to convince him the usefulness of the film medium in publicity. He developed the plans for a special film unit for EMB and was also responsible for one of the first two films produced for this organization – *Drifters*. This film has become part of canon of the genre that Grierson himself named and which since has become the standard way to refer to non-fiction film: *documentary*. Grierson used this word first in order to characterize the work of Robert Flaherty in a newspaper article, later he appropriated it as a concept covering the films he was instrumental in bringing forth what later has become known as the “British Documentary Movement”.

Grierson’s importance here is in many ways overwhelming. Not only did he coin the word, he also came up with a concise definition of the concept, in addition to providing an organizing model, he was instrumental in the discussion of the aesthetic and philosophy of the documentary film and last, but not least, through his organizational and pedagogical work he assured a continuity in documentary film production that was to reach far beyond the original modest aim of providing government with an alternative propaganda outlet. Through the establishment of the EMB Film Unit he created a training background for numerous young film enthusiasts, who in turn would be instrumental in bringing the ideas and the ideals of documentary from the margins of educational film to the centre of post-war television.

When the Empire Marketing Board was disbanded in 1933, Grierson managed to have the Film Unit transferred to the safer organizational environment of the General Post Office (GPO.) This transition also led to a much needed equipment upgrade to sound film technique and within the GPO the activities of the documentary unit accelerated, resulting in more than 50 films, the most famous being *Night Mail* (Basil Wright/Harry Watt 1936.) In 1940 the GPO Film Unit was transferred to the wartime Ministry of Information and renamed Crown Film Unit, securing the British government an experienced group of dedicated film makers for the war effort. By this time Grierson himself had left Britain and the British Documentary Movement for Canada, where he made a similar impressive organizational contribution in the creation and development of the National Film Board of Canada. After the war, he returned to Britain, working in different capacities, among those as responsible for the current affairs program *This Wonderful World* in Scottish BBC from 1957 to 1967

## **Documentary principles**

With reference to Reith’s four principles for the BBC, as summarized by Asa Briggs and referred to above, a similar set of principles may be distilled from John Grierson’s activities and writings on the British documentary movement.<sup>1</sup>

### **1. Film as an educational tool**

The overriding concern of John Grierson was the conception of film – and radio – as an educational tool, the necessity to use modern media to confront the confusion of modernity. In 1937, he stated:

It is worth recalling that the British documentary group began not so much in affection for film *per se* as in affection for national education. If I am to be counted as the founder and leader of the movement, its origins certainly lay in sociological rather than aesthetic aims. (Grierson 1979:78)

This statement points to Grierson's background in the United States, where he had been especially impressed by the work of Walter Lippman on the problematic relationship between media and public opinion in the modern world as expressed in the book *Public Opinion* (1922.) Departing from Lippmann's elitist and anti-democratic solution of government based on a meritocracy, Grierson saw the need for utilizing the popular new media technologies of radio and film in order to counteract the "democratic deficit" in modern society.

### **2.Documentary film as a national responsibility.**

In this there was complete accordance between the two Scotsmen: like Reith, Grierson meant that the use of film as an educational tool should be a national responsibility and funded by the government.

### **3. An organization founded on a public service principle.**

When setting up the documentary film unit at the Empire Marketing Board and later at the General Post Office, Grierson hoped to gain acceptance for an organizational model based on the BBC, but was disappointed when he failed to convince the funding authorities that the work of documentary film makers should be viewed as equally important as radio.

### **4 . An openness for aesthetic innovation.**

This is where the two Scotsmen part drastically: in their approach to the *modernist* aspect of modernity. While John Reith was strictly conservative when it came to cultural tastes – in many ways he represented a return to Victorian ideals in this respect – John Grierson was intensely aware of how new media necessarily implied new aesthetics. While arguing for realism as one of the central principles of documentary aesthetics, Grierson nevertheless also emphasized the need for artistic innovation in order to engage and interest the public. He was instrumental in bringing several innovators with close ties to *avant garde* modernism into the British documentary movement, like the Brazilian film maker Alberto Cavalcanti, the experimental animators Norman McLaren and Len Lye and encouraged the

participation of young modern artists like the composer Benjamin Britten and the poet W.H. Auden.

Ian Aitken (1990 and 1998) has pointed out the influence on Grierson of 19th Century Scottish idealist philosophers. Idealism in Britain had its roots in early 19th Century German idealism, but, according to Aitken, it developed into an ideology which was strongly critical of *laissez-faire* capitalism:

As idealism grew in importance in Britain after 1860 it developed into a movement which advocated state regulation of capitalism in the interest of the nation. British idealism combined elements from both right and left into an often contradictory ideology which emphasized themes such as social duty, reform, spirituality, rule by “enlightened” elites, and the need to return to the social relations of pre-industrial England. (Aitken 1998:35)

Aitken especially points to the Scottish idealist philosophers who, like F.H.Bradley and A.D.Lindsay, were bridging liberal idealism and radical socialist ideas. This meant for Grierson a critical attitude to *laissez-faire* liberalism and support of what can be termed “constrained individualism” – i.e. a governing system where selfish individualism was not allowed to rupture the fabric of society. (Aitken 1990:189.) On the other hand, Grierson also, like the Scottish idealists, was cautious towards a too powerful state, maintaining a check-and-balance attitude towards the State.

In Grierson’s opinion one of the main functions of the state was to act as an intermediary and facilitator in the relationship between the individual and the accelerating complexity of modern society.

Grierson envisioned that .... documentary films would play a key role within what he called the “informational State” , in which social inter-dependency and political legislation would be explained to the public, through propaganda, by documentary film-makers. He believed that failure to establish such a State, based on close collaboration between political legislators and mass communicators, would result in social conflict. (Aitken 1990:192)

In this connection, it should be noted that Grierson during World War II would use the word “propaganda” in a deliberate way to counteract the notion that this word was equal with totalitarian regimes. In the article *Propaganda and Education* from 1943 he makes the case for propaganda in the service of democratic ideals. This, he maintained, was perhaps acceptable in war times, but it was even more neces-

sary in peacetime, when the need to mobilize for the common good in terms of education and welfare made it necessary to ensure that information about the common task would reach every individual in that society – that would constitute the democratic interpretation of propaganda. (Grierson 1979:141-155)

### **The Griersonian impact on post-war broadcasting**

World War II is generally regarded as the apex of the Griersonian documentary, both in form and idea. The British documentary films of that period are still being regarded as central to the historical canon of documentary, with films like *Target for Tonight* (Harry Watt, 1941), *Western Approaches* (Pat Jackson, 1944), and, above all, the films of Humphrey Jennings, like *Listen to Britain* (1941), *Fires Were Started* (1943) and *Diary for Timothy* (1945.)

In the standard version of documentary history the British documentary movement is described in terms of rise and fall, as exemplified in the title of Elisabeth Sussex' 1975 interview book *The Rise and fall of British documentary : the story of the film movement founded by John Grierson*. The story starts with Grierson's "discovery" of film and especially Robert Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* (1922) and *Moana* (1926), then Grierson's development of the documentary film concept, his success with *Drifters* and the establishment of the EMB and GPO Film Units, leading up to the triumph of the documentary movement of the war years and then to a rather sudden dissolution and decline during the 1950's. This story is more or less repeated in Ian Aitken's overview in his anthology on the Documentary film movement, with an added explanation of this decline in that Grierson's and his contemporaries were unable to meet the challenges of a new generation of film makers. This, according to Aitken, in turn created an insularity and a "critical marginalisation of the documentary movement". (Aitken 1998:60)

However, there is one factor conspicuously absent in Aitken's argumentation about the demise and marginalisation of Grierson's documentary movement, and that is the introduction (or rather: re-introduction) of television as the dominant audiovisual mass medium of the 1950s. In a way one may say that it was not the British documentary that had entered a crisis, it was the notion of producing documentaries for commercial theatrical distribution that had become obsolete. As veteran Arthur Elton told Elisabeth Sussex in her 1975 book: "Documentary moved to television, very properly. The best documentary, or most of it, is now television." (Sussex 1975:201) Although there are no specific studies of the direct influence of the British documentary movement on the BBC, there is no doubt that creative forces of the British documentary movement took part in that medial transition. Paul Rotha who was close to, albeit strongly independent of, John Grierson,



was head of the BBC documentary department 1954-55, and did bring other veterans of the documentary movement into the BBC.

There is also a tendency to exclude television news magazines and feature programs like the BBC *Panorama*, the longest-running current affairs series in the world, premiering in 1953, when discussing the status of the British documentary in the post-war years. The format of investigative social television journalism in Britain, it may be argued, dates back to when the two young Grierson acolytes, Arthur Elton and Edgar Anstey in 1935 drove two truckloads of sound film equipment into the slums in London in order to report on living conditions there in *Housing Problems*. This film, was very close to John Grierson's heart and his ideas about the informational state and presented a model that could be easily be emulated with the coming of lightweight sound film equipment and the ideas from *cinéma vérité* in France and *direct cinema* in the United States.

There may therefore be reasons to regard the British documentarists of the 30s as a principal source for the development of British television documentary and news in the 50s and 60s and contributing to the consolidation of the BBC as the shining example of public television in terms of quality, independence and innovation. Although undoubtedly helped by the status of the BBC international broadcast service, BBC television documentary production became the benchmark for international television documentary production during the latter half of the 20th Century, representing the responsibility of factual television in a medium where the emphasis on entertainment represented its opposite.

Thus, I would like to conclude this brief exposition of the impact of *two* Scotsmen on the idea of “socially useful” broadcasting, by claiming at least as much credit for John Grierson in the shaping of the public service idea in 20th century broadcasting as his perhaps more famous compatriot.

#### ENDNOTES:

- <sup>1</sup> In *Cinema Quarterly*, Winter 1932, Grierson himself laid out the *First Principles of Documentary*, but in this article he was primarily preoccupied with arguing for *realism* in the cinema, outlining a program that later would be emulated by the Italian neo-realists after World War II.

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## **“Društveno korisno” u javnom emitiranju: između idealizma i utilitarizma – Griersonovski elementi tradicije**

**Bjørn Sørensen**

### **SAŽETAK**

Rad sadrži raspravu koncepta *društveno korisnog* u vezi s emitiranjem i posebice u odnosu s javnim emitiranjem. Povezujući koncept s John Reithovom utjecajnom knjigom *Broadcast over Britain* iz 1924, napisanoj na temelju autorovih iskustva u osnivanju BBC-a, rad uvodi i predstavlja manje poznati izvor za formiranje standarda koji se povezuju s idejom emitiranja programa kao društveno korisnoj aktivnosti u osobi Johna Griersona, pionira britanskog dokumentarnog pokreta. Rad uspoređuje temeljne socijalne filozofije dva Škota, tvrdeći da je Griersonova uloga moguće podcijenjena kada se uzme u obzir kako se dokumentarna filmska praksa BBC-a može direktno povezati s utjecajem britanskog dokumentarnog pokreta 30-tih i 40-tih godina prošlog stoljeća.

Ključne riječi: povijest medija, povijest filma, dokumentarni film, javno emitiranje, društveno korisni sadržaj, BBC, britanski dokumentarni pokret