The Co-operative Movement and its Press In Britain

by

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With guidelines firmly and courteously, as always, laid down by the Society secretary, I set out on an exploration which I know will be valuable to me as a co-operative editor. I hope it will also be informative and helpful to co-operators who are not involved with the publication of co-operative journals but who read them and from time to time contribute to them.

My main area of concentration is to be the co-operative national press organs, though I am also to giv some attention to initiatives by societies. I am to lo at the needs of the movement that are served, at the service to interests outside the movement where this is attempted, at the economics of maintaining publications and at relations with the general "non-co-operative" pre

Essential Link

Democracy lives through communication. And when a democratic organisation is as complex as the British co-operative movement, with sectors which can at times appear to pull in different directions, communication through the movement's own press is an essential link. The press provides ideas and dialogue that can lead to a eventual understanding and to progress for the movement as a trading and social force. Retail with wholesale, trade with education and politics - the bridges that nee to be built, strengthened and, from time to time, repaired require a co-operative press which is independent of any one section and which at the same time responsibly and loyally serves the movement as a whole.

Like the national newspapers, the journals of the British co-operative movement have dwindled in number over the last 30 years. Societies have merged, boards have decreased in number, the auxiliaries have contracted. And, at the same time, the cost of publishing has escalated.

A number of the former publications have been incorporated into existing journals. The main loss not replaced was the "Sunday Citizen", the successor to "Reynolds News" which was purchased by the Co-operative Press in 1929. This was an attempt to build an informative, educative Sunday newspaper for the wider Labour movement. The paper ceased publication in June 1967, during a period of great difficulty for the British national press as a whole which continues to the present day. The closure followed loss of advertising revenue, failure to secure a sufficient share of private and government advertising, heavy and accelerating withdrawals from the collective advertising scheme, and falls in co-operative society sales on which the collective advertising scheme was based.

Today the British co-operative movement is principally served in the field of national journals by the Co-operative Press Limited, a national federal publishing and printing society, which publishes and prints the weekly "Co-operative News", for which specific purpose the Press was established, and the monthly "Co-operative Marketing and Management". In fact, the only national co-operative journals published by co-operative organisations other than the Press are the monthly "Co-operative Review" and the bi-monthly Party "Platform". And both these publications are printed by the Press within the pages of the "Co-operative News". The Press at its four factories also undertakes printing for the co-operative movement; prints 22 trade union journals and also newspapers and magazines for public bodies and corporations, for nationalised industries and for private firms.

In this article, however, we are concerned only with the Press in so far as it serves the co-operative movement as a publisher.

"THE CO-OPERATIVE NEWS"

The "Co-operative News", circulated mainly through societies, is the only national weekly journal of communication in the movement. Those who brought it into being won the battle for the paper's independence, so that the "News" is the journal of the whole movement and not of any one section.

The Editor exercises editorial control within two principles laid down by the elected board of the Press: first, that it is the official weekly newspaper of the movement and, second, that it is independent of any special section. The first principle calls for restrain and a strong sense of responsibility in the contents of the paper which are attuned to the philosophy, trading practice and current policy of the movement. The second principle calls for flexibility in editing the paper in line with changing practice and policies within the movement.

At times we question those policies and practices. And we certainly advocate a questioning, open minded approach by the movement which we believe should display a willingness to innovate in keeping with the constantly changing spirit of the times. We remember that the world we live in today is not the world we lived in yesterday. We float policy ideas and look to trading areas where the movement's market share needs special attention.

The paper also seeks to create confidence in the future of the movement. Bad news is not ignored but we try to encourage a determination to do better rather than to engender a "Woe, woe" attitude. We do not,

however, seek to pretend that all is well when it is not. We have an absolute loyalty to the movement but we also have a responsibility to urge that it should look at problems as they appear.

Happily, I can say that during my editorship over the last four and a half years no co-operative organisation has tried to restrict freedom to comment. But, at the same time, on our side there is a very firm appreciation that any criticism we may make should be constructive and that our editorial privileges should be exercised with responsibility. In other words, we remember we have liberty, not licence, within the context of our co-operative service.

As Editor of both the "Co-operative News" and "Co-operative Marketing and Management" I could not hope for a more friendly, helpful collaboration from co-operative colleagues. To edit a paper like the "News" would be impossible without a knowledge of the various organisations in the movement and of the nuances involved in their relationships. While many years of involvement have given me that background, the need remains for the Editor to be kept closely in touch with current thinking. The movement has accorded to me that position of trust and I am grateful for it. As relationships have been built up I have been invited to more and more private meetings and seminars. Those that are reported yield copy that is valuable to the movement. And those I attend purely as an observer are invaluable from an Editor's point of view in the background information they provide and the trains of thought they stimulate.

An Editor's job is to plan rather than to report, with more time devoted to organisation than to actual writing. But unless the Editor is aware of current conditions and thinking within the movement, planning is either impossible or abortive.

History

The "News", which celebrated its centenary in 1971, is the oldest co-operative newspaper in the world and may well also be the oldest democratically controlled newspaper.

It was not the first co-operative journal; its distinction was that it was the first not to fail. The original decision to launch the paper was taken by the 1870 Co-operative Congress and the task was entrusted to the Co-operative Union Central Board. But it was a group of co-operators in the north, mainly from Lancashire and Yorkshire, who launched the paper on September 2, 1871. They formed the Co-operative Newspaper Society which was registered in 1873 with capital, promised or subscribed, of £400 from societies, a few individuals and the Co-operative Wholesale Society.

For the first 16 years the paper was printed by the Co-operative Printing Society. Then in 1887 the Newspaper Society decided to print on its own presses. The Society amalgamated with the "Scottish Co-operator" Newspaper Society in 1920 and became the National Co-operative Publishing Society. In 1934, five years after its purchase of "Reynolds News", the Publishing Society became the Co-operative Press Ltd. Coincidentally, the Co-operative Printing Society which first printed the paper merged with the Co-operative Press in the centenary year of the "News".

In the meantime in Scotland a "Scottish Co-operator" a monthly, was published by John Innes from 1863 to 1871 when it was incorporated in the "Co-operative News". From 1893 the "Scottish Co-operator" was a separate weekly paper, though much of its content was common with the "News". Then in 1974 the "Co-operator" became the Scottish edition of the "News" which carries change pages for Scotland.

Major objectives

Looking more closely at the contemporary "Co-operative News", and its Scottish edition, it has seven major objectives.

First, the paper provides a forum, through special articles and interviews, for discussion of major co-operative policy. And this is perhaps the most important function of the "News" as the only national weekly journal of communication in the movement.

It is a function that can be extended through the "Letters" pages which have expanded over recent years. The more contributions the "News" receives in an interchange of views and news the more effective it can be. Subjects recently explored in the feature pages have been wide ranging and have included the Community Land Act and its effect on planning; the proposed Co-operative Development Agency; workers co-operatives; the new State earnings related pensions scheme; credit unions; the new Co-operative Housing Agency; member and non-member spending in co-operatives; the change in emphasis from social to business co-operation; the new structures for pay and prices from 1977; facets of Congress organisation; the Little Neddy report on physical distribution management; the problems of lay leadership and member participation; strategy for a larger slice of the market; the ICA report on youth; co-operative representation on public bodies; inflation accounting. Leaders over the past few months have included those on local authority planning related to market penetration; the Co-operative Union consumer conference; co-operative housing development; demonstrating the movement's social purpose; the single national federation; the Price Code consultative document; the Congress presidential address and special paper; the consumer service of the Co-operative Bank; the importance of the rate of net

profit; the pay policy and the hardened market; the co-operative market share, specially referring to non-food.

Second, the "News" aims to cover trading developments. It includes special trade surveys which have been built up, particularly over the past two years.

They range from fashion, through toys, Do It Yourself, gardening, curtains and bedding, carpets, sport and leisure, to greengrocery, freezers, drinks, delicatessen and other sectors of trade important to the movement. The examples indicate that special attention is paid to developing markets where the Co-op can be encouraged to aim for a bigger slice.

The paper reports all the national annual trade conferences organised by the constituent associations of NACO and also some of the trade seminars organised at the Co-operative College. The conference of chief officials held annually at the College is extensively reported. Through the Store Traffic and Tradewise pages, which are regular features of the "News", the paper brings promotional and other trade information to top and middle management, to store and branch managers and to other employees. The paper spotlights society trade developments of special interest - the planning of new superstores, the re-planning of existing stores, new ventures into specialist outlets.

Third, the "News" reports local news on other society activities and on personalities. Meetings, conferences, promotions, competition results feature from week to week. And news of appointments, promotions and long service awards is also included.

Fourth, the "News" covers co-operative and government action on current issues. The subjects are wide ranging, from prices policy, pensions and planning

through to the proposed Co-operative Development Agency and - prior to the referendum - the Common Market issue.

Fifth, the "News" includes regular articles of special consumer interest through the Consumer Commentary and other features. We have a good working relationship with the British Standards Institute and the Consumers' Association. And we do, from time to time, take up consumer issues outside the retail sphere. The recent report of the National Consumer Council on "Consumers and the nationalised industries", for instance, was covered. The Editor has interviewed the Minister of State for Prices and Consumer Protection and the Director General of Fair Trading. The "News" also gives extensive coverage to the National Consumer project and conference organised by the Co-operative Union Education Department; also to the National Consumer Congress organised by the National Consumer Council.

Sixth, the paper covers the political and educational sides of the movement.

Much spontaneous copy comes in to the "News" on conferences, meetings and projects organised by the political and educational co-operative organisations, including the Guilds. Feature articles are from time to time invited on topics of political and educational concern and "News" staff also report functions. Policies of the broader Labour and trade union movements are also covered from time to time. The paper includes a weekly political column from the Co-operative parliamentary group members, while the Co-operative Union chief education officer also contributes on a regular basis. The "News" published a special four-page feature for International Women's Year on the employment of women in the co-operative movement and reported the IWY conference organised by the Co-operative Union Education Department. We also covered the IWY

service and rally organised by the Women's Guild in Westminster Abbey and the Central Hall, Westminster. The regular column by Mary Waddington includes much that is of special interest to the Guilds though it is written for the broad readership of the "News".

Seventh, through World of Co-ops and other articles, the "News" reports on developments in overseas movements, many of which have lessons for ourselves.

Recently, for instance, with the development of credit unions being advocated in this country by the Co-operative Union and Co-operative parliamentary group members, the "World of Co-ops" reported on the credit unions of Quebec.

In covering all the various facets of co-operative activity the "News" reports the Co-operative Congress, Education Convention, Party Conference, the Women's Guild Congress, the Scottish Women's Guild Congress, the National Guild of Co-operators conference and the Woodcraft Folk conference.

It also reports the meetings of the CWS shareholders, the Co-operative Union Central Executive and General Purposes Committee, the Parliamentary Committee, the Co-operative Party National Executive, the Education Executive and the Co-operative Press shareholders.

A thread running through all the paper's objectives is that of supporting the social purpose of the movement and underlining the need to demonstrate that we are different from our private trade competitors.

Co-operative Review

Once a month the "News" carries within its pages the "Co-operative Review", the official journal of the Co-operative Union which is edited by the Union's information officer. The content and lay-out are the

responsibility of the Co-operative Union; the sole responsibility the Co-operative Press carries for the "Review" is the printing.

The "Review" publishes co-operative statistical information, interviews on the Union's work and role in the movement, Union policy, news from the Education Department and College, co-operative political pieces, book reviews and articles on co-operative history. The "Review" has been carried within the pages of the "News" since January 1966, having formerly been a separate publication. The journal began as a bi-monthly in August 1926, succeeding a small publication, the "Co-operative Union Quarterly Review", which first appeared in March 1914 in a modest pamphlet form. In 1936 the "Review" became a monthly publication. From 1961 the Co-operative Education bulletin, which had been a separate journal, appeared within the "Review".

Party "Platform"

Once every two months the "News" carries "Platform", the official publication of the Co-operative Party, which is responsible for the lively content of the paper. "Platform" started in September 1965 as a separate monthly publication but since 1970 has appeared within the "News". Additional copies are printed by the Press for separate distribution to local Parties, a considerable number of boards and individuals subscribing to the Party's literature service.

Apart from the printing, the Co-operative Press is responsible for the lay-out of "Platform". This is undertaken by the Press special editorial department which also sub-edits and lays out copy for print customers who wish to take advantage of all or part of a package, of interest to many outside customers, which also includes advertisement services and distribution of the publication.

"CO-OPERATIVE MARKETING AND MANAGEMENT"

The second and more specialist Co-operative Press publication, then entitled "Co-operative Management and Marketing", was launched in 1968 "to fill a gap in the literature available to the co-operative movement", as was then stated.

The new magazine was also a rationalisation of co-operative publications. Its predecessors, "Agenda" and the "Co-operative Official", were linked in the new publication, which is published in association with the National Association of Co-operative Officials.

The first editorial stated, "In content we hope tha the note will be one of practicality as far as possible. But over the years the publication tended to become more and more academic. With the re-launch last year the ai was to draw it back on to more practical lines.

When "Co-operative Marketing and Management" was re styled in October 1975 the co-operative movement was on the threshold of a difficult marketing stage, with the market hardening and competition intensifying.

One of the aims of the magazine is to examine the problems and also the initiatives and controls which can help societies not only to capture an increasing share of the national market but also assist towards greater efficiency with higher net profit and a higher level of investment in trading assets. This can be done on "Marketing and Management" in more depth than in the "Co-operative News". The two publications are, indeed, complementary to each other and from time to time topics and controversies raised in the weekly are taken up in the monthly publication.

Articles on marketing and management policies and practices are featured regularly. The magazine has

examined milk distribution and future alternatives, cash flow, fashion, sales promotions, dividend stamps, capital acquisition, new developments in the laundry and dry cleaning industry, various aspects of security, stock control, TV rentals, the use of computers, staff training and departmental store development.

Developing and changing markets are examined from month to month. Since the magazine was re-styled, for instance, it has looked at the ready meals market, the changing face of detergents, home brewing, spa waters, tights and stockings, pickles, the snack market, the pre-packed mixes for cake, bread and allied products, confectionery, German food and wine, canned fish. Legislation and other matters affecting societies have been reviewed in some depth. The Community Land Bill; the Social Security Pensions Act; inflation accounting; the development of superstores, hypermarkets and district centres; the development of stores in town centres are among the topics which have been covered.

In-depth stories on the enterprise of individual societies have been included. These have covered such developments as hypermarkets in Staffordshire, the Leicestershire Society's Thurmaston superstore, the Royal Arsenal bakery operation, North Eastern Society's fresh food warehouse, the ACC new creamery at Blaydon, the CWS new tea factory, North Eastern Society's promotional package, the Co-op Bank and employees' accounts, CWS farms and CWS exports. Regular articles which look at the development of the Co-op's competitors appear and College contributions examine subjects such as training.

The aim is to include broader articles on policy issues from time to time.

Plans have also been laid to strengthen the NACO section of the magazine which will include not only

the NACO general secretary's notes but also copy from the secretarial and management executives of the Association, personality pages, profiles and current co-operative topics. "Co-operative Marketing and Management" goes to every member of NACO at their homes, to a good number of boards, to a large number of product manufacturers and to reference libraries and universities at home and overseas.

THE ECONOMICS

In an inflationary period the economics of maintaining co-operative publications require sustained effort and control. Constant monitoring of the weekly or monthly figures is a necessary part of our job, just as it is with retail society officials. Costings as well as conferences are the tools of the Editor's trade. The cost of newsprint, labour, telephones, postage and carriage has escalated. And against this background the newspaper and print industry is undergoing a much publicised technological revolution.

Let me, briefly, give you some idea of what has happened at the Co-operative Press. Since 1968 the "News" has printed Web offset. And since last year both the "News" and "Co-operative Marketing and Management" have left hot metal setting behind them and changed to IBM, though hot metal setting is retained for those print customers who wish to use it.

At this moment we are in the process of taking yet another step forward - to photo setting which gives greater flexibility and should also lead to higher output. All fascinating. And all in the long run more economic as well as more efficient.

Whatever their production backing, however, publications need two sources of income: one from circulation, the other from advertising. On both

counts we have been greatly encouraged in recent years, though we are always working for more improvements.

And here, perhaps, I might be permitted a word on advertising, just to emphasize that the more advertising the "News" attracts, the bigger the paper is and the more editorial it contains. A week when there is heavy advertising is also a week when there is extra editorial space.

THE CONSUMER FIELD

The great gap in British co-operative publications is in the consumer field.

For the last eight years the movement has not had a consumer magazine or paper. Until then there was "Good Shopping", published by the CWS, and its predecessors, the "Home Magazine" and earlier "The Wheatsheaf". A resolution from Birmingham Society to the 1974 Co-operative Congress requested the Central Executive to investigate the possibility of the publication by the movement, at monthly intervals, of a quality members' journal to be distributed by retail societies without charge to their customers and to submit their findings, including the financial implications, to the 1975 Congress.

In a report later prepared for the Central Executive, attention was drawn to the report of the working party on consumer education and protection, which was adopted by the 1973 Congress. This working party had considered in some depth the possibility of a members' journal, but had concluded that on grounds of cost the idea was "impracticable at present". It was also reported that possibilities of this nature had been examined by both the Co-operative Press and the CWS on numerous occasions, but always the high cost of preparation, printing and distribution had ruled out such a venture.

The Co-operative Union itself had neither the financial nor the staff resources to publish and distribute the type of journal proposed in the resolution, and examples were quoted of the level of staff and resources that might be required.

The Co-operative Press and the CWS were asked for their views and concurred that escalating costs since 1971 - when detailed costings had been prepared - made the prospects worse rather than better. The Technical Panel for Publicity also considered the matter and concluded that to launch a national members journal "is a specialised and speculative publishing venture, involving a very high level of subsidy which it cannot be envisaged that societies would be prepared to pay."

The Central Executive accepted the advice that in the light of these observations no further action should be taken, and reported to Congress.

There the matter rests. The "News" does publish much more consumer information than in the past. But while we have diversified to some degree, it is not the function of the "News" to turn itself into a consumer newspaper. Its function is as a forum for the movement on policy issues. And it is also a trade newspaper. These functions cannot and should not be combined with a major role as a consumer publication either for co-operative members and customers or for wider distribution. This would be a separate function for a new publication.

What has to be remembered, however, is that the British co-operative movement has shown no predilection for the use of print as a communications medium. And before any co-operative organisation ventured into the realm of a high circulation consumer magazine,

societies would need to be very clear about the cost and about their own practical support for it. Further, if distribution were contemplated through wholesale and retail newsagents the cost would escalate enormously.

SOCIETY PUBLICATIONS

A small number of retail societies publish newspapers or magazines for employees and co-operative activists. At one time the number of society publications ran to three figures. Now there are only a handful. These include the Norwest, Royal Arsenal, Co-operative Retail Services, Leeds, North Eastern and Birmingham Society publications, all printed by the Co-operative Press.

Apart from purely staff journals, the content of the publications varies from society to society. Some concentrate heavily on member activity; others place the emphasis on trading services offered by the society.

One of the most recent society publications to be started is that of the Leicestershire Society, first published three years ago and now coming out two or three times a year. The eight-page members magazine is distributed though stores and gives news of society activities. Trading results and developments, in-store consumer evenings, testing panels associated with superstores, are all reported.

Apart from the newspapers and magazines, a good number of societies distribute duplicated newsletters from their chief officials to the employees. These comment on trading results, on society developments and give news on appointments.

The CWS now publishes a printed report to employees, in colour. Publication is twice a year, following

the half-yearly and yearly CWS reports. The brochure goes to all employees through the Group and departmental managers.

RELATIONS WITH THE OUTSIDE PRESS

This should properly be the subject of a complete article. Briefly, however, I believe all of us would agree that relations between the co-operative movement and the non-co-operative press could be better. And this is not to blame the outside press at either national or local level. There are times when co-operators feel the press could have given the movement a better deal. Certainly some of the attacks and denigrations have at times seemed unjustified. But on the other hand, have we always taken the trouble to present ourselves to the press? Have we, in fact, always attempted to explain what we are about? Some of the proposals at present being put forward for improved relations with the press at Congress suggest we know we have not.

And when we do make an effort with the national press do we at times attempt a gimmicky, personalised approach which, though well-intentioned and aimed at the outside world, does nothing for that internal co-operative collaboration which is so vital for the movement's future? Column inches (though we could do with more of them) are not necessarily a measure of effective press relations.

To project our loosely knit and democratic movement as a trade organisation to pressmen and women who may be more used to dealing with vertically integrated companies, where the decisions down to the height of store fittings are taken at one central point, is not easy to say the least. Those of us who know the movement sometimes forget how complex it may appear to an outsider.

This was vividly brought home to me some little time ago when a public relations officer from outside the Co-op asked me to explain the structure of the movement and how it all fitted together. At the end of the explanation, given to the best of my ability, he said "Yes. Do you think you could draw it so that I could see it? It might seem simpler then." I suspect that many pressmen have privately wished for a diagram or two.

With an individual society dealing with the local press, the situation is simpler and many societies do an excellent job on press relations, with good coverage on store openings, trading results, member activities and so on. Here we can remember the basics: advance notification of events so that an opening or a conference can be slotted in to the press diary reasonably early. With a store opening a fairly detailed press kit is helpful, setting out food and non-food selling areas, car parking facilities, warehousing, the architects, engineers, shop fitters and so on. With press releases sent out from any society organisation - double space typing on one side of the paper only. And it does help if the main point of interest is brought out in the lead to the story. The secret is to try to capture the reader's - or the sub-editor's - interest in the first sentence or two.

A PARTNERSHIP

This, then, is the overall press picture. It is one which reveals gaps but also, I hope, some strengths on which the movement can build.

Whatever section of the co-operative press we choose to examine, however, the success of a publication comes only through a partnership.

There is the partnership of the publication with the organisations which can, if they will, provide the facilities for the collection of stories which should be told.

And there is the partnership of the publication with the people who, in large measure, control its distribution.

Only when all the partners are prepared to pull together can the publication attain its objective: that of contributing effectively to the successful development of the movement.

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