

## 6. Back in England: Market Research and the London Press Exchange

And then at the end of 1933 when I got back, a man called Colin Clark, who was an economist at Oxford phoned me – a friend of mine, phoned and said, “Mark, do you know anything about market research?” And I said “No”. He said, “That’s alright, ignore that question. The appointments officer here has had a request from a firm in London. They want someone who is a good economist to go and be in their market research department”. And I said, “Well, if that’s what they want, I am prepared to be an expert on market research.” So I went along and I was interviewed in December 1933 by the Chairman and the Managing Director of the London Press Exchange, and the salary was £300 per year. I thought, God, this is real money at last, after coaching students at half a crown an hour! They said “Any more questions?” I said, “No, no, that’s fine.” One of them said to me, “Do you think you could manage on £300 a year?” -- cause I said I’m married, and had a small son ... “Can you manage on £300 a year?” I said, “Yes, I think I can”. And he said, “I don’t think you can. I don’t see how you can. I would be much happier if you would accept £350 a year”. So, I said, “Well, that’s very, very nice of you, I’d be happier too.” And he said, “Okay fine, you start January 1st.”

*DA:* Philip was born then?

*MA:* Yes, Philip was born in 1933.

*DA:* Where were you living then?

*MA:* In, I think it was Carleton Gardens in Camden Town, North London. And I started work there and the first job given to me was to manage a survey on the readers of the British national press – who were they, what did they read, what did they want to read and so on. And we took a sample of 20,000 respondents.

*DA:* Sample?!

*MA:* Sample, yes [laughs]. And at one point I was asked, “Do you think that’s the right figure.” And I wasn’t sure whether they meant that’s too small or too big. And I thought maybe they mean it’s too small. So I said “Well of course you could always expand it afterwards if you want to”. But 20,000 turned out to be adequate, and the technique was very simple. The interviewers went round with a complete set of yesterday’s newspapers – the previous day’s newspapers. And they said to a respondent, “Do you read one of these?” (I think it was nine

national newspapers) And if they said, “Yes I read...” – The Daily Sketch or The Morning Post or whatever paper they mentioned. You said, “Fine, here’s yesterday’s...” Times, Mirror, Sketch, whatever it is, “...and we’d like you to go through with us, and tell us on each page what you read, what you looked at -- the news, the features, the advertisements, everything in the paper”. And 20,000 people said yes, they would, and once they said, yes, they had looked at it, then we wanted to know – did you read all of it, or part of it, or just look at the headlines, and so on. So we were able to say at the end, “Alright the readers of the Daily Herald (which was then the great working class newspaper), the readers of the Daily Herald are much more likely to look at a political story if it is on the front page left-hand side, than if the same story or a similar sort of story is on the right-hand side of the front page. They are much more likely to read an article in the News Chronicle if it is signed by someone with a real name, than if it is simply attributed to Our Correspondent. That they like the idea, though it may be the same person writing the two stories, that the readers of The Times read the leaders in The Times regularly.” And incidentally when, months after when this finished, I told this and showed the figures to one of the younger members of the Walter family, which was the family that owned the Times then he said, “ My God I didn’t think they were such dopes.” [laughs]

Anyway, at the end of this we knew a great deal about what the British newspaper reading public liked in its papers, didn’t like in its papers, what caught their attention so that they read right through to it. And there were some very interesting findings.

Now one thing, and there were nine volumes of this report, ‘cause it was an enormous document. One of the uses I made of it, many, many years later, was when I wrote a piece for *Encounter* in which I said, “Let’s take as our starting point that if you know nothing about society, then the easiest way to find out what their values are is to look at the advertisements that appear in their newspapers, that they read. Because you can bet your life that the people who stay in business long enough to spend a lot of money on advertising have caught the right mood and motives and values of that particular society.” I said, “We take that as our starting point – let’s take these nine papers that I examined in 1934, look at some of the outstanding ads, by well-known manufacturers – now turn to contemporary newspapers and take the ads of the same products by the same manufacturers in the same papers and see if, by looking at the ads, there has been a change in their evaluation of what are the values the British public.”

It turned out to be absolutely fantastic. In the Guinness<sup>1</sup> ads for example, which were broadly on the theme that if you drink Guinness, you’d be twice as strong and you’d be able to do twice

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<sup>1</sup> “Guinness is Good For You”

as much work in carting around steel girders. The ad for Bournevita was a woman with arms stretched out like this and three little children growing up – they are going to be strong and healthy because they are drinking Bournevita. Now Ponds face cream showed an aristocratic dame in her late-30s, I suppose, gently dabbing her face with a little Ponds cream and saying, “I would never use anything else on my face.” And so on – a whole series of those things. The Horlicks one was ‘Drink Horlicks tonight: tomorrow when you go for your interview, you will get the job.’ [laughs]

Now if you take those same products and same advertisers today. They’re trying to sell the same products on the basis, of, you drink Horlicks and you will be a smash with the girls tomorrow’, ‘you drink beer and the gang will be all around you’, ‘you use our cosmetic and everyone will want you’.

*DA: So you think attractiveness rather than health or strength?*

*MA: And sexual. And, instead of showing little children growing up and becoming more and more mature, you show little children night after night getting greedier and greedier as they gulp down more bloody sausages, or whatever it is you are trying to sell! This must reflect a change in the values of the people. That they no longer believe that the right thing is to work hard, to get jobs, to have healthy maturing children -- The values have changed. I still feel that not enough is made of the importance of the content and character of advertising as an indicator of what are the values of a society.*

Anyway that was a by-product of that study.

*DA: Who were you working for again?*



**Mark Abrams (undated)**

*MA:* I was working for the London Press Exchange, which in those days was probably the biggest agency in this country. And it had one characteristic that was a godsend to me – they thought I was good [laughs]– and so did their clients. And therefore they gave me a good deal of autonomy.

I can remember two or three occasions when, for example, I did a survey for a client – a London Press Exchange client – the J. Arthur Rank Organisation. They had completed a film called *Hamlet* by a man called Shakespeare and they thought it was going to be terrific. But someone said, look you've got to get 10 million people to pay ninepence each before you get your money back on this – make sure it is tailored right for them. So they asked me to do research and I came back and I said, "You know, part of the trouble is that some of the people don't know who this character William Shakespeare is. They want to know if he has written any other stuff – has any of it been on in the West End. You know, is that a real name, or is that just a pen name he is using? Other people at the other extreme say "We would never go to see anything where commerce had laid its dirty hands on a classic". I said "I think you'd better drop the name

'Shakespeare' from the big headlines you are planning to use on it and have 'Jean Simmons and Laurence Olivier in a great love drama'. And then little letters on the bottom, 'William Shakespeare wrote the script', or something like that!"

Anyway they did alter it, and Rank himself said, "You know I like very much like what you have done, the piece of research, I think it has helped a great deal. Now, what I would like you to do is think of a piece of research that you would like to do yourself. It doesn't need to have any value to me at all or to the film industry at all or anything – just something that you can regard as giving you a kick and have them send the bill to me."

And I said, "The thing I would like to do you may not approve of". He said, "it has nothing to do with it. What do you want to do?" I said, "Well I want to make a study of who are the children, who go off every Saturday morning to your cinema clubs? What sort of homes do they come from? What influence do their parents have on what happens to them on Saturday mornings? How are they performing at school as compared to children who are not addicts of these movies? And generally study parts of what is the impact of being a Saturday morning JR Odeon addict, upon children as compared with not being one of them"?

And he said, "O, sounds okay. Alright go ahead." I said, "it is going to cost £2,000". Which in those days was an awful lot of money. He said, "that's alright. You tell them to send the bill to me."

And I did. I don't say I spent the cheque, the cheque went to the London Press Exchange. But I did that piece of research and the teachers were, for example, were very co-operative. We got them to grade each child. We did not tell them which child was an Odeon addict, and which wasn't. We simply got them grade each child on commitment to doing their work, on co-operation in the classroom as against aggressiveness in the classroom, various traits, various forms of behaviour of that kind. They played ball, did it very well. Then we interviewed the parents and some of them said, "Oh well, yes, we know Billy", or whatever his name is, "goes to these things but we find it rather interesting because afterwards we can talk about the movie, and you know, we feel we are together with him". "We know about Pearl Buck", not Pearl Buck but Pearl White or whatever her name was, "because Billy tells us all about her and then we go to see her films for ourselves".

And we looked at the comics they read. And again the parents of the kids who were addicts, said, "Oh yes, we know he reads comics but then so do we when he is finished with them". So it was a very interesting piece of research.

And another sort of incident was when the London Press Exchange produced what they thought was a terrific piece of advertising – for Crunchie bars, you know Crunchie bars? – honeycomb with chocolate over them. It was a little kid balancing a Crunchie bar on his nose with his mouth open, expecting a Crunchie bar to fall in. The agency and the art director thought this was terrific. It was eye-catching – kids would wonder about it – want to go in and say, “A Crunchie bar for me, a Crunchie bar for me”. Well anyway Cadbury’s said “Well, can’t we do some research to see what young teenagers think of this?”. Oh, I said, “yes”. We did it with tape recorders. We went around and showed kids the ad – young teenagers they were – showed the ad and said, “Now tell us what you feel about us and how you react to it” – and we taped them. So when it came to presentation I was asked to report the results of this survey, I said, “Well, I think the easiest, simplest and quickest way to convey the findings to you is if I play you a tape of some of the first, but typical, interviews we carried out. “

They said “Fine – all right.”

So the tape started and the first person, a girl, said “Well, if I may say so, ...I think that’s soppy.” [laughs]. “Thank you very much, Miss.” Second tape – “Cor blimey, you mean snotty- nosed kid doing something that isn’t going to get him anywhere is going to be a good ad? I reckon it is rotten!” And so the tape went on, and after a few of these, I think that is probably enough, isn’t it? And Edward Cadbury said, “There is no other agency in the country, I think, would have played those tapes to us if they’d done the research. From now on, all our advertising will be placed with the London Press Exchange, and all our research will be done by Mark Abrams”. And it was interesting working for clients of that kind.

And again just before the war what was then the Gas, Light and Coke Company said they wanted to know how they could get people to switch – to stop adopting electricity and remain loyal to gas – that was the real fight. And I said, “Well you know the only way you can do this is by interviewing people who are using gas, seeing what the satisfactions, dissatisfactions, difficulties, problems they had with using gas, and see if they can be countered rationally”. And they said, “Sure, okay, fine, go ahead”. So I did a survey in parts of what was then the Gas, Light and Coke Company’s area. And each time we piloted it I added more and more social material to it, about housing density, about the quality of the housing. Of course it was relevant to their attitudes towards the use of gas. And, you know, it became in fact a social study of housing conditions of the London poor, more or less. And they [LG&C] said it was fine. “We never thought that you’d do anything more than go around saying to people -- how much do you like gas? – a lot, a bit, not at all, you hate it – that sort of thing. [laughs] And this is terrific.”

Now, it so happened that, during the war the London School of Economics started a magazine, a journal, quarterly journal called Agenda – Agenda for the Post-war World – and the then director, whose name I forget, said, “you know we would like to publish this as an article in Agenda for the Post-war World.” And it was published as such. So, that was one of the good things about working for them, that one always felt I’m practically free to do anything, as long as it’s good, not necessarily useful in helping them to sell something, but good. They will appreciate that. There were lots of opportunities like that came up, working for them.

And also it was during that time that I first met a man called Paul Lazarsfeld who is the father of survey research and so on. He was on his way to America. And he told me that he had a very good young woman as his assistant, Gertrude Pardner<sup>2</sup>, and she would like to come to London to do research. I don’t know if this is true or not, whether she did want to come to London or whether she would have preferred to have stayed in Vienna, but I was pretty sure that Paul wanted her to come to London. She came to work for us, and it turned out that she had worked with Paul Lazarsfeld on a survey of milk consumption in Vienna. And we were going to do a survey on milk consumption in England, so it fitted in perfectly. And out of that grew a sort of small seminar that I held regularly at the Waldorf Hotel (since we were charging it to the client that was okay with everybody, including the client) in which I got together about, oh half a dozen, outstanding psychoanalysts/psychologists and we talked about the consumption of food as a psychological area for research, and beverages as well – you know, like Horlicks and Bournevita and Ovaltine and that sort of stuff, and Bovril – and

*DA: Why were you interested in that?*

*MA: Well, because the LPE had several clients who produced food stuffs and beverages and so on and so I thought, “Well why not?, If the money’s there, it’s an interesting subject ... there must be a psychology of food consumption or psychology of nutrition, whatever one likes to call it. No one has ever done any work on this before.”*

*DA: You were curious about this? Or were you looking ..... kind of social factors?*

*MA: Well, I had to have, had to have some sort of payoff at the end. So I said that the final meeting of the seminar will be devoted to ‘What advice would you give to the manufacturer in the light of our discussions?’ The sort of people who were there was a man called Ernst Kris,*

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<sup>2</sup> Sounds clearly like Pardner but perhaps should be Gardner. No links found.

who was the editor of the Imago, a journal of the International Institute of Psychoanalysis, who had come fresh from Vienna; there was a man, [Emmanuel] Miller, Jonathan Miller's father, you know, and another three or four people like that. And they were, I won't say brilliant discussions, but we knew we were there for a good lunch and a general relaxed talk in which people were free, to talk and say, no one was taping them, put their stuff in print. But that was the sort of thing that was possible for me in those days and I greatly enjoyed it. They were good employers [laughs].

*DA:* Sounds wonderful.