

April 17, 1958

Letter, Eugene Lyons to Howland Sargeant

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Summary:

AMCOMLIB founder Eugene Lyons expresses reservations to AMCOMLIB President Sargeant about the measures outlined in his Memorandum on strengthening RL programming.

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EUGENE LYONS

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April 17, 1958

Dear Howland:

Many thanks for sending me your memorandum of April 9th, on actions to strengthen programming.

The most encouraging element in it is your intention of taking a personal hand in the policy process on the operational level. For the rest, I'd be less than frank if I pretended that the outline fills me with optimism. My main reaction is one of bafflement. The cure seems hardly related to the disease. May I impose on your patience to explain myself?

The proposals look like an expansion of the machinery of control and evaluation, superimposed on existing machinery. So I ask myself:

Why should there be this need for more and more policing of content? After all, an oversized police force implies that there are an abnormal number of lawbreakers to be watched. Wouldn't a lot of arduous, costly and (on the basis of experience to date) ineffective police work be obviated if we uncovered and got rid of the culprits?

The crisis that produced this series of actions is not a generalized weakness in programming. It is a specific set of criticisms or charges -- to the effect that an alarming amount of leftish, Marxist, anti-Western and even pro-Soviet matter has crept into the programs.

The criticism has been voiced loudly in the emigration (for details see Eric, who gets the brunt of it). It has figured in reports by "Sveditel" and others. Staff members in our New York shop have been trying hard to call attention to it for a long while. And of course there have been Don Levine's and my own continuous protests.

We have backed up our charges with a long array of specific and often shocking cases: in Mr. Levine's detailed analysis of a time-segment of programs, my

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running memos., those of some evaluators. When faced with some of this material, Mr. Bertrandias, who until then scoffed at the charges, was obliged to admit them in substance if not in detail. Even the cautious Mr. Dunham conceded that the "bias" in the programming is "quite obvious."

We were not discussing just mistakes and ineptness, which are unavoidable in such an operation. We dealt with faults of a specific type, recurring in program after program and making a distinct pattern. That pattern is clearly a reflection of the minds and the political commitments of some of those who plan, write and supervise programs.

I do not think, in all candor, that another "independent review" is required to establish what is all too obvious. The findings of such a time-killing review can't change the programs we have already analyzed and discussed. It seems to me that the evidence is in and that a verdict is in order. I hoped and believed that you would make it. Only when the trouble is acknowledged can we proceed to seek a remedy. The alternatives, as I saw them, were these:

1. Either the charges are unwarranted, in which case the measures outlined are unnecessary --
2. Or they are justified, in which case the measures are largely irrelevant.

What bothers me most, I suppose, is that the memorandum -- on which some of us had staked a lot of hope -- avoids mention of the trouble to be dealt with. It sets up additional procedures of the kind that have thus far proved futile.

What's involved, in any case, is not procedural. It is plainly political and ideological. Yet I see no effort to identify the persons or the mental quirks responsible for the obvious aberrations, as the indispensable condition for for eliminating or neutralizing them. Worse, it leaves the cure of the condition to the same people who have steadfastly denied that there was any ailment requiring cure.

As it stands, we have no frank acknowledgement of the harmful programs and therefore, by implication at least, exoneration of those responsible. I do not believe (and neither, I suppose, do you in your heart) that improved "policy papers" will be enough. The

programs inevitably will continue to reflect the political bias of those who fashion them. The more sincere these people are, indeed, the more this will be true.

These people haven't been making "mistakes." They have been behaving honestly in line with their convictions. They will continue to do so -- perhaps more cautiously, less overtly, while the pressures are on.

The evaluation mechanisms already in force should have sufficed. But they never will, even if we expand them tenfold, as long as the programming staff is overloaded with minds and attitudes incompatible with the vigorous conduct of anti-Soviet propaganda -- with men whose thinking is largely in the framework of Marxism (good and bad variations), who despise Dulles, abominate Chiang Kai-shek and Syngman Rhee, detest British left-wingers and German social democrats, favor the critics of American policy as against its defenders, cannot bring themselves to say an unkind ~~weak~~ word about Red China or Red Yugoslavia, etc. And their sins, as you know, are not merely those of commission but, no less important, those of omission. Repeatedly opportunities for anti-Soviet propaganda are ignored; the picture ~~that~~ of the West that emerges from any large batch of programs is highly unappetizing because of the assiduous chronicling of strikes, disasters, blunders, etc.

This is the problem, Mr. President. But it is scarcely touched by the actions outlined, if I read them aright.

Take Section (b) of Point 9, which comes closest to the issue. It foresees "means of delegating to a responsible person or group a larger measure of authority for editorial content." But who is to decide the need for such transfer and who is to implement it? The same man who most vigorously defended past and present editorial content, who abused those of us who called attention to intolerable program content and personally asked for the elimination of "Sveditel."

I submit that any person or group designated by him would be unlikely to improve matters, especially if he continued to have the last say. At the very least the decisions on delegating authority should be made by Mr. Kelley who, I presume, reads every

day's program output. I had hoped, in fact, that you would yourself tackle the basic job of house-cleaning that is so desperately needed. You remarked that you don't relish the role of "umpire." But you're not an umpire -- you're the boss.

If no major changes are made in personnel and in responsibility for ideological judgments, it will be unreasonable to expect major changes in the character of programming. The crux of the matter is the nature of the thinking that dominates the station and this, I must add, includes the evaluation element, since self-evidently harmful stuff regularly passes without

The memorandum leaves me uncertain whether the gravity of the problem is being recognized. The fact that the situation, already a scandal within our organization, has not turned into a public scandal is really a minor miracle. I doubt that we have the time for more elaborate reviews. I think we should act decisively on the basis of the review in which we have been engaged these last five or six months. I doubt that outsiders are better equipped to judge the picture than you and Don Levine, Sveditel and Gene Lyons, Dunham and other staff members. If there are still margins for doubt that action is needed, I fail to discern them.

I apologize for the length of this letter. I assure you that I didn't relish writing it, but the urgency of the challenge made it unavoidable. Our duty is to put the station back on the job for which it was planned.

As ever, sincerely

Gene