

them to win back some of their freedom and at the same time to do a more useful job by undertaking to do specific jobs for external organizations. And in these exceedingly formative years, there is even a case for asking why universities like those in Britain should not tinker with all kinds of radical schemes. Why, for

example, should universities not run television stations, or newspapers, to provide an independent income and a service to the community as well? But these are only trivial expedients. In reality, the present troubles are an opportunity for radical change within the universities. It will be a pity if it is lost.

## Please Don't Use Your Telephone

THE gap between the promise of technology and reality continues to widen. In Britain, two of the Post Office's latest proposals have not been specifically designed to make it more costly and at the same time less convenient to use telephones, but this will almost certainly be their result. First, on April 10, in the House of Commons, the Postmaster General, Mr Roy Mason, announced, as part of a package of widespread increases of telephone charges, that from October 1 directory inquiries, which are now free—as they ought to be, because not every telephone kiosk or subscriber is provided with a national directory—are to cost a shilling each if the information supplied by the inquirer “is insufficient for a number to be found readily”.

The disturbing thing about this proposal, which, of course, is hardly likely to encourage the use of telephones under any circumstances, is the vagueness of the criteria by which the Post Office will decide whether or not the inquirer has provided insufficient information and therefore should be charged. Mr Mason, predictably, had nothing to say about this. The Post Office itself says the decision will rest entirely with the telephone operator, and that sufficient information means “roughly the amount needed to deliver a letter”. Apparently the Post Office will not expect the exact address, but nobody knows just what it does mean. Obviously nobody, least of all the Post Office, knows quite how the system will work and how operators will make their arbitrary decisions. The danger, of course, is that potential telephone users will be discouraged—and that operators will be enabled to rationalize their habitual annoyance with customers by charging a shilling every time they have to make a civil answer.

The reason for this charge is said to be to save the Post Office money and to persuade callers to make every effort to find the telephone numbers for themselves—in other words, to reduce the convenience and service offered. The Post Office's latest scheme is in keeping with this outlook. In the hope of persuading people in London to use their directories more and directory inquiries less, the Post Office proposes to replace the four volume London Postal Area Directory by no fewer than thirty-six “community” directories covering the whole of Greater London. This absurd decision, which was elicited from the Post Office on Tuesday by a letter in the *Times*, was apparently made for two reasons. First, the Post Office has come to the conclusion that the sheer bulk of the existing directory discourages people from using it. Second, it has conducted a market research study of the telephone habits of individual subscribers in London and has

come to the outstanding conclusion that most of the calls people make are within their own neighbourhood or “community of interest” as the Post Office likes to call it. From this, the Post Office with perverse logic claims that the directory now supplied in London provides the average subscriber with ten times more information than he needs and so in 1971 a subscriber will only receive one of the thirty-six local directories. What happens if a subscriber wants to find a number outside his local area? The Post Office is quick to point out that any individual who asks for all thirty-six directories will be given them, but will the Post Office really give them without question? It clearly does not anticipate many takers, for it claims the new scheme will save £0.25 million a year in paper and printing costs. And can the Post Office really believe that being cluttered with thirty-six small directories is preferable to having four large ones? And what if a subscriber knows only the name of the people he wants to call, not their district? Clearly, as far as the Post Office is concerned, he can amuse himself by looking through all thirty-six directories to find out, or can call directory inquiries and be charged a shilling for the privilege.

The trouble, of course, is that the Post Office is spoiling the ship for a ha'p'orth of tar. Although the Post Office may save its £0.25 million on directory costs, in the long run it will reduce the convenience and therefore the use of the telephone system, waste everybody's time and discourage subscribers from making calls anywhere outside their local area. Not that that is out of keeping with the Post Office's way of running things. It seems to have given up the pretence that it is interested in stimulating traffic except perhaps in the middle of the night. Spokesmen for the London Telecommunications Region have taken openly to saying that in London, at least, the Post Office is not at the moment seeking to stimulate traffic because the system is at full stretch. And is there a better way of reducing telephone use than making it irritatingly tedious to find a number? Mr Mason said on April 10 that the Post Office needs “additional revenue to help finance the huge capital programme to improve the service for existing uses and to give the country the telecommunications service it needs”. He seems to prefer to raise this capital not by increasing telephone traffic by making the service more convenient but by charging more for less service and discouraging more calls. It is small wonder that there are twice as many telephones per 1,000 people in the United States, Sweden, New Zealand and Canada—and more in Switzerland, Denmark, Australia and Norway—than in Britain.