**Telethons: Connecting the Means to the ends**

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(Do Telethons represent the “respectable” face of a cold and money-grabbing society? What are the links between Charity and the free market economy? Can disabled people’s groups justify taking Telethon money by intending to ‘use it against them’?

Ken Lumb looks at the history of TV fundraising, and some of the issues involved – **Coalition** Editor)

Telethons have a long history in the oppression of disabled people. Het Dorp, the segregated “disabled village” in the Netherlands, was built with money raised by a telethon in the early 1960s. In the 1970s disabled people in Canada, who were then forming Coalitions, identified Telethons (e.g. “Timmy’s Christmas Telethon”) and the charity ethic as a major barrier to securing funding for their organisations and for appropriate provisions in general. Similar television appeals have existed for some years in the USA also – e.g. Jerry Lewis’s “Easter Seal”. Not surprisingly, some ex-Telethon children from these countries are now speaking out about their humiliating experiences and campaigning against them.

Before the 1980s this kind of mass appeal through television was a more restrained affair in the UK. “Blue Peter”, with its appeal to the moral education of middle and upper class children, occasionally singled out a disabled cause. Since then, however, Children in Need and Telethon have popularised this approach so that all classes, all age groups are now steeped in the “charity is fun” ethic.

The significance of this popularisation of the charity ethic should not be underestimated. In the UK, the growth of Telethon, etc, has gone hand in hand with the whittling away of state provision and the infiltration of market forces into every nook and cranny of our existence.

The self interest, grab-what-you-can-get, and sheer greed generated by this sort of society requires various forms of legitimation – and this is where the nationwide television charity spectaculars come in. They have the significant ideological effect of representing the nation as overflowing with compassion and generosity, which gives the impression also that those groups who are defined as “genuinely needy” are being looked after quite nicely!

Moreover, in common with other charity appeals on our behalf, these television spectaculars perform a neat ideological trick by, firstly, transforming our shared social oppression into many instances of individual misfortune. Then, secondly, by replacing the social and political solutions required to overcome our oppression with the generosity of many individuals.

These spectaculars do not say anything new about disability. The gross mis-representation of our lives as forever tragic, occasionally brave, and nearly always “blood-suckingly” dependent is familiar enough. What they do though is confirm expectations on a massive scale, to shore-up those same old barriers to our social integration. They also exploit numerous disabled people in their programmes and events, many of them children. We share their humiliation as we witness it.

My own position, therefore, is that we need to get rid of TV charity spectaculars because they are fundamentally oppressive, and they require our **total** opposition.

However, the unity and the consequent effectiveness of this opposition, which has developed within our movement over the past three years or so, culminating in the huge Block Telethon demonstration in London of July 1992, is still being jeopardised by various forms of collusion with the television companies and programme makers.

Most disreputable are those disabled entrepreneurs who, having discovered that oppression can be profitable, either promote themselves by appearing in Telethon (e.g. Martin Duffy and Mik Scarlet), or provide cosy disability awareness sessions behind the scenes (e.g. Stephen Duckworth of ‘Disability Matters’).

There are those disabled people also who appear to have no qualms in displaying outraged opposition one day, then banking the money the next! Whilst this may retain “radical credentials” for themselves and their organisations, it does little for the credibility of the opposition.

Less disreputable perhaps, but a fallacy, is the view that you can take money from Telethon, etc, then use it against them. But what better form of support, sign of approval and reassurance could the organisers of these events get than requests for money from organisations of disabled people? Moreover, in taking money we provide powerful arguments to those intent on divide-and-rule, who can then accuse us of hypocrisy and dual standards. We also compromise ourselves, and confuse potential allies, with contradictory messages; e.g. Telethon is bad but the money is good! Rather than blocking Telethon, etc, these applications for money will simply prolong their existence.

Nevertheless, I recognise from personal experience that there are genuine concerns, real dilemmas here about how we fund our organisations, and that much more could be done in our movement to provide forms of mutual support towards securing a more equitable sharing of those resources available. It may be the case also that these concerns within our own organisations are more directly experienced, more tangible to our membership than those of a movement or of wider collective responsibilities. When the lack of funds restricts our ability to get things done, to develop, to be creative, then we have those conditions which may pressurise us into attempting to justify actions that are essentially unjustifiable. And, if we are honest, I doubt if many of us could claim to have remained untainted by the pervasive and corrupting money related values of the last decade.

The organisation within which I am most closely involved – the Greater Manchester Coalition of Disabled People – itself went through a difficult period a few years ago of, firstly, accepting money from Telethon and Children in Need, then debating the issues, and now rejecting these sources.

But this is an important part of our struggle, isn’t it?, the need for us to personally and collectively question whether or not the means (i.e. how we go about things, how we relate to each other) are consistent with and adequate for achieving our ends? In my view, colluding with these television charity spectaculars is both inconsistent and damaging to the ends – i.e. getting rid of them.