What We Know About the Effects of Mass Communication: The Brink of Hope*

By Joseph T. Klapper

The "brink of hope" for research in mass communications, according to this author, lies in a new orientation toward its study and some resulting generalizations which order many of the seemingly diverse and unrelated findings. This article contains a description of the new orientation, of the emerging generalizations, and of the findings which they may mold into a body of organized knowledge.

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Twenty years ago writers who undertook to discuss mass communication typically felt obliged to define that unfamiliar term. In the intervening years conjecture and research upon the topic, particularly in reference to the effects of mass communication, have burgeoned. The literature has reached that stage of profusion and disarray, characteristic of all burgeoning disciplines, at which researchers and research administrators speak wistfully of establishing centers where the cascading data might be sifted and stored. The field has grown to the point at which its practitioners are periodically asked by other researchers to attempt to assess the cascade, to determine whither we are tumbling, to atempt to assess, in short, "what we know about the effects of mass communication." The present paper is one attempt to partially answer that question.

The author is well aware that the possibility of bringing any order to this field is regarded in some quarters with increasing pessimism. The paper will acknowledge and document this pessimism, but it will neither condone nor share it. It will rather propose that we have come at last to the brink of hope.

THE BASES OF PESSIMISM

The pessimism is, of course, widespread and it exists both among the interested lay public and within the research fraternity.

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Some degree of pessimism, or even cynicism, is surely to be expected from the lay public, whose questions we have failed to answer. Teachers, preachers, parents, and legislators have asked us a thousand times over these past fifteen years whether violence in the media produces delinquency, whether the media raise or lower public taste, and just what the media can do to the political persuasions of their audiences. To these questions we have not only failed to provide definitive answers, but we have done something worse: we have provided evidence in partial support of every hue of every view. We have on the one hand demonstrated that people's existing tastes govern the way they use media,[1] and on the other hand reported instances in which changed media usage was associated with apparently altered tastes.[2] We have hedged on the crime and violence question, typically saying, "Well, probably there is no causative relationship, but there just might be a triggering effect."[3] In reference to persuasion, we have maintained that the media are after all not so terribly powerful,[4] and yet we have reported their impressive successes in such varied causes as promoting religious intolerance,[5] the sale of war bonds,[6] belief in the American Way,[7] and disenchantment with boy scout activities.[8] It is surely no wonder that a bewildered public should regard with cynicism a research tradition which supplies, instead of definitive answers, a plethora of relevant but inconclusive, and at times seemingly contradictory, findings.

Considerable pessimism, of a different hue, is also to be expected within the research fraternity itself. Such anomalous findings as have been cited above seemed to us at first to betoken merely the need of more penetrating and rigid research. We shaped insights into hypotheses and eagerly set up research designs in quest of the additional variables which we were sure would bring order out of chaos, and enable us to describe the process of effect with sufficient precision to diagnose and predict. But the variables emerged in such a cataract that we almost drowned. The relatively placid waters of

[1] E.g., Lazarsfeld (1940), pp. 21-47; Wiebe (1952), pp. 185 ff. (*For complete bibliographical details, refer to Bibliography.*)

[2] E.g., Lazarsfeld (1940), pp. 126 ff.; Suchman (1941). Both Lazarsfeld and Suchman point out that although media may seem to be causative agents, further research reveals that their influence was energized by other factors. The point is discussed at length below.

[3] This is the typical, if perhaps inevitable conclusion, of surveys of pertinent literature and comment. See, for example, Bogart (1956), pp. 258-274.

[4] E.g., Lazarsfeld and Merton (1949); Klapper (1948). The point is elaborately demonstrated in regard to political conversion in Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet (1948), and in Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee (1954).

[5] Klapper (1949), pp. II-25, IV-47, IV-52.

[6] Merton (1946).

[7] The efficacy, as well as the limitations, of media in this regard, are perhaps most exhaustively documented in the various unclassified evaluation reports of the United States Information Agency.

[8] Kelley and Volkhart (1952).

"who says *what* to *whom"* were early seen to be muddied by audience predispositions, "self-selection," and selective perception. More recent studies, both in the laboratory and the social world, have documented the influence of a host of other variables, including various aspects of contextual organization;[9] the audiences' image of the source;[10] the simple passage of time;[11] the group orientation of the audience member and the degree to which he values group membership;[12] the activity of opinion leaders;[13] the social aspects of the situation during and after exposure to the media,[14] and the degree to which the audience member is forced to play a role;[15] the personality pattern of the audience member,[16] his social class, and the level of his frustration;[17] the nature of the media in a free enterprise system,[18] and the availability of "social mechanism[s] for implementing action drives."[19] The list, if not endless, is at least overwhelming, and it continues to grow. Almost every aspect of the life of the audience member and the culture in which the communication occurs seems susceptible of relation to the process of communicational effect. As early as 1948, Berelson, cogitating on what was then known, came to the accurate if perhaps moody conclusion that "some kinds of *communication* on some kinds of *issues,* brought to the attention of some kinds of *people* under some kinds of *conditions* have some kinds of *effects."*[20] It is surely no wonder that today, after eight more years at the inexhaustible fount of variables, some researchers should feel that the formulation of any systematic description of what effects are how effected, and the predictive application of such principles, is a goal which becomes the more distant as it is the more vigorously pursued.

[9] The effect of such variables as the number of topics mentioned, the order of topics, camera angles, detail of explanation, explicitness vs. implicitness, one side vs. both sides, and a host of other contextual variables has been exhaustively studied in virtually thousands of experiments conducted under the auspices of the U. S. Navy, the U. S. Army, and Pennsylvania State University, as well as by individual investigators. Summaries of several such studies will be found, *passim,* in Hovland, Lumsdaine, and Sheffield (1949) and Hovland, Janis, and Kelley (1953).

[10] E.g., Merton (1946), pp. 61 ff.; Freeman, Weeks and Wertheimer (1955); Hovland, Janis, and Kelley (1953), ch. 2, which summarizes a series of studies by Hovland, Weiss, and Kelman.

[11] Hovland, Lumsdaine, and Sheffield (1949), in re "sleeper effects" and "temporal effects."

[12] E.g., Kelley and Volkhart (1952); Riley and Riley (1951); Ford (1954); Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955) review a vast literature on the subject (pp. 15-133).

[13] Katz (1957) provides an exhaustive review of the topic.

[14] E.g., Friedson (1953). For an early insight, see Cooper and Jahoda (1947).

[15] Janis and King (1954), King and Janis (1953), and Kelman (1953), all of which are summarized and evaluated in Hovland, Janis, and Kelley (1953); also Michael and Maccoby (1953).

[16] E.g., Janis (1954); also Hovland, Janis, and Kelley (1953), ch. 6.

[17] E.g., Maccoby (1954).

[18] E.g., Klapper (1948); Klapper (1949), pp. IV-20-27; Wiebe (1952).

[19] Wiebe (1951-2).

[20] Berelson (1948), p. 172.

This paper, however, takes no such pessimistic view. It rather proposes that we already know a good deal more about communications than we thought we did, and that we are on the verge of being able to proceed toward even more abundant and more fruitful knowledge.

THE BASES OF HOPE

This optimism is based on two phenomena. The first of these is a new orientation toward the study of communication effects which has recently become conspicuous in the literature. And the second phenomenon is the emergence, from this new approach, of a few generalizations. It is proposed that these generalizations can be tied together, and tentatively developed a little further, and that when this is done the resulting set of generalizations can be extremely helpful. More specifically, they seem capable of organizing and relating a good deal of existing knowledge about the processes of communication effect, the factors involved in the process, and the direction which effects typically take. They thus provide some hope that the vast and ill-ordered array of communications research findings may be eventually molded, by these or other generalizations, into a body of organized knowledge.

This paper undertakes to cite the new orientation, to state what seem to be the emerging generalizations, and to at least suggest the extent of findings which they seem capable of ordering. In all of this, the author submits rather than asserts. He hopes to be extremely suggestive, but he cannot yet be conclusive. And if the paper bespeaks optimism, it also bespeaks the tentativeness of exploratory rather than exhaustive thought. Explicit note will in fact be taken of wide areas to which the generalizations do not seem to apply, and warnings will be sounded against the pitfalls of regarding them as all-inclusive or axiomatic.

The Phenomenistic Approach. The new orientation, which has of course been hitherto and variously formulated, can perhaps be described, in a confessedly oversimplified way, as a shift away from the concept of "hypodermic effect"[21] toward an approach which might be called "situational," "phenomenistic," or "functional." It is a shift away from the tendency to regard mass communication as a necessary and sufficient cause of audience effects, toward a view of the media as influences, working amid other influences, in a total situation. The old quest of specific effects stemming directly from the communication has given way to the observation of existing conditions or changes—followed by an inquiry into the factors, including mass communication, which produced those conditions and changes, and the roles which these factors played relative to each other. In short, atempts to assess a stimu-

[21] Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee (1954), p. 234.

lus which was presumed to work alone have given way to an assessment of the role of that stimulus in a total observed phenomen.

Examples of the new approach are fairly numerous, although they still represent only a small proportion of current research. The so-called Elmira[22] and Decatur[23] studies, for example, set out to determine the critical factors in various types of observed decisions, rather than focussing exclusively on whether media did or did not have effects. McPhee, in theoretical vein, proposes that we stop seeking direct media effects on taste and inquire instead into what produces taste and how media affect that.[24] The Rileys and Maccoby focus on the varying functions which media serve for different sorts of children, rather than inquiring whether media do or do not affect them.[25] Some of the more laboratory-oriented researchers, in particular the Hovland school, have been conducting ingeniously designed controlled experiments in which the communicational stimulus is a constant, and various extra-communicational factors are the variables.[26]

This new approach, which views mass media as one among a series of factors, working in patterned ways their wonders to perform, seems to the author to have made possible a series of generalizations which will now be advanced. They are submitted very gingerly. They seem to the author at once extremely generic and quite immature; they seem on the one hand to involve little that has not been said, and on the other hand to be frightfully daring. They do seem, however, to be capable of relating a good deal of data about the processes, factors, and directions of communication effects, and of doing this in such a way that findings hitherto thought anomalous or contradictory begin to look like orderly variations on a few basic themes.

Emerging Generalizations. The entire set of generalizations will first be presented in their bare bones, and without intervening comment. The remainder of this paper will be devoted to justifying their existence and indicating the range of data which they seem able to organize. Without further ado, then, it is proposed that we are as of now justified in making the following tentative generalizations:

1. Mass communication ordinarily does not serve as a necessary and sufficient cause of audience effects, but rather functions among and through a nexus of mediating factors and influences.

2. These mediating factors are such that they typically render mass communication a contributory agent, but not the sole cause, in a process of reinforcing the existing conditions. (Regardless of the condition in question—

[22] *Ibid.*

[23] Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955).

[24] McPhee (1953).

[25] Riley and Riley (1951), and Maccoby (1954).

[26] E.g., the experimental program described in Hovland, Janis, and Kelley (1953).

be it the level of public taste, the tendency of audience members toward or away from delinquent behavior, or their vote intention—and regardless of whether the effect in question be social or individual, the media are more likely to reinforce than to change.)

3. On such occasions as mass communication does function in the service of change, one of two conditions is likely to obtain. Either:

a. the mediating factors will be found to be inoperative, and the effect of the media direct; or

b. the mediating factors, which normally favor reinforcement, will be found to be themselves impelling toward change.

4. There are certain residual situations in which mass communication seems to wreak direct effects, or to directly and of itself serve certain psychophysical functions.

5. The efficacy of mass communication, either as contributory agents or as agents of direct effect, is affected by various aspects of the media themselves or of the communication situation (including, for example, aspects of contextual organization, the availability of channels for overt action, etc.).

Therewith the generalizations, and herewith the application. The schemata will be applied first to the field of persuasive communication, and then, much more briefly, to the data dealing with the effects of mass communication on the levels of audience taste. The hope, in each case, is to show that the data support the generalizations, and that the generalizations in turn organize the data and suggest new avenues of logically relevant research.

THE GENERALIZATIONS APPLIED: PERSUASION

Persuasive communication here refers to those communications which are intended to evoke what Katz and Lazarsfeld have called "campaign" effects,[27] i.e., to produce such short term opinion and attitude effects as are typically the goals of campaigns—political, civic, or institutional. Long-range phenomena, such as the building of religious values, are not here a focus of attention, nor are the marketing goals of most advertising.

Reinforcement. It is by now axiomatic that persuasive communication of the sort we are discussing is far more often associated with attitude reinforcement than with conversion. The now classic *People's Choice* found reinforcement, or constancy of opinion, approximately ten times as common as conversion among Erie County respondents exposed to the presidential campaign of 1940,[28] and a nine to one ratio was found in the more elaborate study of Elmira voters in 1948.[29] Various other studies have attested that, in

[27] Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955), pp. 17 ff.

[28] Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet (1948).

[29] Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee (1954).

general, when the media offer fare in support of both sides of given issues, the dominant affect is stasis, or reinforcement, and the least common effect is conversion.

But we are not here proposing merely that the media are more likely to reinforce than to convert. We are also proposing, as some others have proposed before us,[30] and as we have stated in generalization number 1, that the media typically do not wreak direct effects upon their audiences, but rather function among and through other factors or forces. And we are going slightly farther by proposing, in generalization number 2, that it is these very intervening variables themselves which tend to make mass communication a contributing agent of reinforcement as opposed to change. We shall here note only a few such variables, deliberately selecting both from among the long familiar and the newly identified, in order to suggest the extent of findings for which this generalization seems able to account, and which, seen in this light, become logically related manifestations of the same general phenomenon.

Audience predispositions, for example, have been recognized since the very beginnings of communications research as a controlling influence upon the effect of persuasive mass communication. A plethora of studies, some conducted in the laboratory and some in the social world, have demonstrated that such predispositions and their progeny—selective exposure,[31] selective retention, and selective perception—intervene between the supply of available mass communication stimuli and the minds of the audience members.[32] They wrap the audience member in a kind of protective net, which so sifts or deflects or remolds the stimuli as to make reinforcement a far more likely effect than conversion.

Let us turn from these very old friends to newer acquaintances. Communications research has recently "rediscovered" *the group.* Katz and Lazarsfeld, drawing on the literature of small group research, have proposed, with considerable supporting evidence, that primary-type groups to which the audience member belongs may themselves function as reinforcing agents and

[30] For explicit statements, see McPhee (1953) and Meyersohn (1957). Similar orientations are implicit in Katz (1957), in all studies cited in footnotes 22-26 above, and in various other works.

[31] "Selective exposure" seems to the author a somewhat more realistic term than the classic "self-selection." It is in a sense true that a given program "selects its audience before it affects it" (Lazarsfeld, 1940, p. 134), i.e., that it acts like a sieve in screening its particular audience from among the vast potential audience of all media offerings. But the sieve works, after all, only because the people, rather than the program are, consciously or unconsciously, selective.

[32] No attempt can be made to cite here the hundreds of studies which demonstrate one or more of these processes. Summaries of a considerable number which appeared during or before the late 1940's will be found in Klapper (1949), pp. Intro 11-12, I-15-26, and IV-27-33. For a particularly intriguing demonstration of selective exposure, see Geiger (1950), and for an extraordinarily elaborate demonstration of selective perception, see Wilner (1951).

may influence mass communication to do likewise.[33] People tend, for example, to belong to groups whose characteristic opinions are congenial with their own; the opinions themselves seem to be intensified, or at least made more manifest, by intra-group interaction; and the benefits, both psychological and social, of continued membership in good standing act as a deterrent against opinion change. Group-anchored norms thus serve, on a conscious or unconscious level, to mediate the effects of communications. The proposition has been empirically demonstrated by Kelley and Volkart,[34] who found that, in general, persuasive communications were more likely to be rejected if they were not in accord with the norms of groups to which the audience member belonged; there were indications, furthermore, that the tendency was intensified in regard to issues more salient to the group, and among persons who particularly valued their membership. Groups are further likely to supplement the reinforcing effect by providing areas for oral dissemination. Various studies have shown that communications spread most widely among persons of homogeneous opinion, and espically among those who agree with the communication to begin with.[35] The "rediscovered group," in short, intervenes between the media stimuli and the people who are affected, and it does so, other conditions being equal, in favor of reinforcement.

Consider another phenomenon which is now in the limelight of communication research: *opinion leadership,* or, as it is sometimes called, "the two-step flow of communication."[36] The operation of such leadership is by definition interventive. And opinion leaders, it turns out, are usually supernormative members of the same groups to which their followers belong—i.e., persons especially familiar with and loyal to group standards and values.[37] Their influence therefore appears more likely to be exercised in the service of continuity than of change, and it seems therefore a reasonable conjecture—although it has not, to the author's knowledge, been specifically documented—that their role in the process of communication effect is more likely to encourage reinforcement than conversion.

All the intervening phenomena which have thus far been cited pertain, in one way or another, to the audience members—to the element of *whom* in the old Lasswell formula. But the range of mediating influences is not so restricted. *The nature of mass communication* in a free enterprise society, for example, falls under this same rubric. It is surely not necessary to here rehearse in detail the old adage of how the need for holding a massive audi-

[33] Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955), pp. 15-133.

[34] Kelley and Volkhart (1952), and Kelley (1955), both of which are summarized in Hovland, Janis, and Kelley (1953), Ch. 5.

[35] E.g., Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955), pp. 82-115; also Katz (1957).

[36] Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955), pp. 309-320, and Katz (1957).

[37] Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955), pp. 82-115, and 219-334 *passim,* especially pp. 321 ff.; also Katz (1957).

ence leads the media, particularly in their entertainment fare, to hew to the accepted, and thus to tend to resanctify the sanctified.[38] But it should here be noted that this is to say that the demands of the socio-economic system mediate the possible effects of mass communication in the direction of social reinforcement.

Such phenomena as these lend some credence to the proposition that the media typically work among and through other forces, and that these intervening forces tend to make the media contributing agents of reinforcement. And the generalization, to which these factors lend credence, in turn serves to organize and relate the factors. Diverse though they may be, they are seen to play essentially similar roles. One is tempted to wonder if they do not constitute a definable class of forces—whether, if the process of communicational effect were reduced to symbolic formulation, they might not be severally represented as, say, Q_1, Q_2, and so forth to Q_n. The author does not propose anything so drastic. He merely notes that the generalization suggests it. It suggests, simultaneously, relevant topics for further research. *Do* opinion leaders actually function, as the generalization suggests, to render mass communication a more likely agent of reinforcement than of change? And what of all those Q's between Q_3 or Q_8 and Q_n? What other phenomena function in a similar manner and toward the same end?

We may note also that this generalization, simple though it is, not only accounts for such factors as provide its life blood. It provides as well a sort of covering shed for various bits and pieces of knowledge which have hitherto stood in discrete isolation.

Consider, for example, the phenomenon of *"monopoly propaganda"*—i.e., propaganda which is vigorously and widely pursued and nowhere opposed. Monopoly propaganda has been long recognized as widely effective, and monopoly position has been cited as a condition which virtually guarantees persuasive success.[39] But monopoly propaganda can exist only in favor of views which already enjoy such wide sanction that no opposition of any significance exists. Viewed in the light of the generalization, monopoly position is seen not as an isolated condition of propaganda success, but as a specific combination of known factors. It is a name for the situation in which both the media and virtually all the factors which intervene between the media and the audience, or which operate co-existently with the media, approach a homogeneity of directional influence. Monopoly position is, as it were, a particular setting of the machine, and its outcome is logically predictable.

Change, with mediators inoperative. Generalization number 3 recognizes that although the media typically function as contributory agents of reinforce-

[38] E.g., Klapper (1948); Klapper (1949), pp. IV-20-27; Wiebe (1952).

[39] E.g., Lazarsfeld and Merton (1949); Klapper (1948) and Klapper (1949), pp. IV-20-27.

ment, they also function as agents of attitude change. In reference to this simple point, there is surely no need for lengthy documentation: the same studies that find reinforcement the predominant effect of campaigns typically reveal as well some small incidence of conversion, and a plethora of controlled experiments attest that media, or laboratory approximations of media, can and often do shift attitudes in the direction intended by the communicator. But the generalization further proposes—and in this it is more daring than its predecessors—that such attitude changes occur when either of two conditions obtain: when the forces which normally make for stasis or reinforcement are inoperative, or when these very same forces themselves make for change.

Let us consider first the proposition that change is likely to occur if the forces for stasis are inoperative. A set of experiments which has already been mentioned above is extremely indicative in reference to this proposition. Kelley and Volkhart, it will be recalled, found that, in general, communications opposed to group norms were likely to be rejected if the issue was particularly salient to the group, and that they were more likely to be rejected by persons who particularly valued their group membership. But there is another side to the Kelley-Volkhart coin, viz., the findings that the communication opposed to group norms was more likely to be *accepted when the issue was not particularly salient* to the group, and that it was more likely to be accepted *by persons who did not particularly value their membership* in the group.[40] Put another way, *changes were more likely to occur in those situations in which the mediating effect of the group was reduced.*

A whole slew of other findings and bits of knowledge, both old and new, and previously existing as more or less discrete axioms, seem susceptible of being viewed as essentially similar manifestations of this same set of conditions. It has long been known, for example, that although the media are relatively ineffectual in conversion, they are quite effective in forming opinions and attitudes in regard to *new issues,* particularly as these issues are the more unrelated to "existing attitude clusters."[41] But it is precisely in reference to such issues that predispositions, selective exposure, and selective perception are least likely to exist, that group norms are least likely to pertain, that opinion leaders are least ready to lead—that the mediating forces of stasis, in short, are least likely to mediate. The intervening forces, in short, are likely to be inoperative, and the media are more likely to directly influence their audience.

Much the same explanation can be offered for the observed ability of the

[40] Kelley and Volkhart (1952), and Kelley (1955), both of which are summarized in Hovland, Janis, and Kelley (1953), Ch. 5. As noted above, the findings are highly indicative, but not absolutely clear cut.

[41] Berelson (1948), p. 176.

media to influence their audience on peripheral issues[42] while simultaneously failing in the major mission of the moment, and the same situation probably obtains in regard to media's ability to *communicate facts or even change opinions on objective matters without producing the attitude changes* that such facts and opinions are intended to engender.[43] It may well be that the facts and opinions are not related to the desired attitude change sufficiently strongly to call the protective mediating forces into play: the communication content is probably not recognized as necessarily relevant to the attitude, as not salient, and mediation does not occur. This interpretation, by the way, could very easily be tested.[44]

The inverse correlation between the capability of the media to wreak attitude change and the degree to which the attitude in question is ego-involved may well be another case in point.[45] But this paper cannot analyze and rehearse, nor has the author wholly explored, the entire range of phenomena which might be explained on the basis of the forces for stasis being inoperative. If the generalization is at all valid, it will gather such phenomena unto itself. Let it be the role of this paper to present it, to germinate as it will.

Changes through Mediators. Let us turn now to the second part of the proposition about the conditions under which media may serve as agents of opinion change. It has been suggested that such an effect is likely when either of two conditions obtain: when the forces for stasis are inoperative—as in the cases which have just been discussed—and, secondly, when the intervening forces themselves favor change.

Let us look again, for example, at the influence of group membership and of group norms. These typically mediate the influences of mass communication in favor of reinforcement, but under certain conditions they may abet communicational influences for change.

[42] E.g., McPhee (1953), pp. 12-13; also Hovland (1954).

[43] Hovland, Lumsdaine, and Sheffield (1949), pp. 42 ff. and elsewhere, *passim;* summarized in Klapper (1949), pp. IV-9-17.

[44] A rather simple controlled experiment might be set up, for example, in which two groups were exposed to communications, one of which merely presented the objective facts, and the other of which explicitly pointed out the implications for attitude change of accepting the objective facts. In line with the interpretation presented above, we would hypothesize that in the latter communication the *objective facts themselves* would be more likely to be rejected. Such an experiment would differ from the numerous studies of the relative efficacy of "implicit" vs. "explicit" conclusions, which have to date been primarily concerned with whether the *conclusions,* rather than the facts themselves, were more or less likely to be accepted.

[45] For what, after all, is an "ego-involved attitude," other than an attitude which is particularly salient to the person who holds it, and thus particularly well protected by predispositions, selective perception and the like? For an amusing statement of a similar view, see "John Crosby's Law," as quoted in Bogart (1956), p. 215. Suggestively relevant studies are numerous and include, e.g., Cooper and Jahoda (1947); Cooper and Dinerman (1951); Wilner (1951); Cannel and MacDonald (1956); and various others.

In an ingeniously designed experiment by McKeachie,[46] for example, communications regarding attitudes toward Negroes, and the discussion which these communications engendered, made some group members aware that they had misperceived the pertinent group norms. The great majority of such individuals showed opinion changes in the direction of the norm, which was also the direction intended by the communication. The *newly perceived norms* impelled the audience toward the communicationally recommended change.

A *switch in group loyalties or in reference groups* may likewise predispose an individual toward consonant opinion changes suggested by mass communication.[47] Studies of satellite defectors, for example, suggest that persons who have lived for years as respected members of Communist society, and then fall from grace, develop a new susceptibility to Western propaganda. As their lot deteriorates, they turn their eyes and minds to the west, and their radio dials to VOA and RFE. By the time they defect they have developed a set of extremely anti-Communist and pro-Western attitudes, quite out of keeping with their previous lives, but in accord with what they regard as normative to their new refugee primary group.[48]

Group norms, or predispositions otherwise engendered, may furthermore become dysfunctional; in learning theory terminology, the response they dictate may cease to be rewarding, or may even lead to punishment. In such situations the individual is impelled to find a new response which does provide reward, and communications recommending such a changed response are more likely to be accepted. Some such phenomenon seems to have occurred, for example, in the case of Nazi and North Korean soldiers who remained immune to American propaganda appeals while their military primary group survived, but became susceptible when the group disintegrated and adherence to its normative attitudes and conduct ceased to have survival value.[49] The accustomed group norms in such instances had not merely become inoperative; they had become positively dysfunctional and had sensitized and predisposed their adherents to changes suggested by the media.

Personality pattern appears to be another variable which may mediate the influence of communications, and particular syndromes seem to abet change. Janis, for example, found in a laboratory study that those of his subjects "who manifested social inadequacy, inhibition of aggression, and depressive tendencies, showed the greatest opinion change" in response to persuasive

[46] McKeachie (1954).

[47] E.g., Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955), pp. 66-81.

[48] The phenomenon has not been explicitly detailed, but is implicit in various studies performed for the United States Information Agency, and in Kracauer and Berkman (1956).

[49] E.g., Shils and Janowitz (1948); also Schramm (1954), pp. 17-18.

communication. They appeared, as Hovland puts it, to be "predisposed to be highly influenced."[50]

In sum, it appears that the generalization is supported by empirical data —that intervening variables which mediate the influence of mass communication, and which typically promote reinforcement, may also work for change. And again, the generalization, in turn, accounts for and orders the data on which it is based. Group membership, dysfunctional norms, and particular personality patterns can be viewed as filling similar roles in the process of communicationally stimulated opinion change. Other similarly operative variables will doubtless be identified by a continued phenomenistic approach, i.e., by the analysis of accomplished opinion changes.

The generalization furthermore serves, as did the others, to relate and explain various discrete findings and isolated bits of knowledge. It would appear to cover, for example, such hitherto unrelated phenomena as the susceptibility to persuasive appeals of persons whose primary group memberships place them under cross-pressures, and the effects of what Hovland has called "role playing."[51]

The first case—*the susceptibility to persuasive communications of persons whose primary group membership places them under cross-pressure*[52]—is fairly obvious. In terms of the generalization, such people can be said to be at the mercy of mediating factors which admit and assist communicational stimuli favoring both sides of the same issue. We may also observe that any attitude shift which such a person may make toward one side of the issue does not necessarily entail any reduction of the forceful mediation toward the other direction. On the basis of the generalization, we would therefore predict not only change, but inconstancy, which has in fact been found to be the case.[52a]

The effects of role playing seem another, if less obvious, example of opinion change occurring as a result of a mediating, or, in this case, a superimposed factor which in turn rendered a communication effective. Hovland reported that if persons opposed to a communication are forced to defend it, i.e., to act in a public situation as though they had accepted the recommended opinion, they become more likely actually to adopt it.[53] The crucial element of role playing is, of course, artificially superimposed. But in any case, the entire phenomenon might be viewed as something very akin to what occurs when an old norm, or an old predisposition, ceases to lead to reward. Successful role playing in fact invests the opposing response with reward. The

[50] Janis (1954), which is summarized in Hovland, Janis, and Kelley (1953), pp. 276 ff. (Quotes are from p. 277.)

[51] Hovland, Janis, and Kelley (1953), Ch. 7.

[52] E.g., Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee (1954); also Kriesberg (1954).

[52a] Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet (1948), p. 70.

[53] Hovland, Janis, and Kelley (1953), Ch. 7.

communication is thus given an assist by the imposition of new factors which favor change. The potentialities of this technique, incidentally, are of course appalling. The Communists have already developed and refined it and we have christened the process "brain-washing."

Various other bits of knowledge about communication effect can be viewed as related manifestations of this same general phenomenon, i.e., the phenomenon of communications inducing attitude change through the assistance of mediating factors which themselves favor change. But it is the goal of this paper to be only suggestive, rather than exhaustive or exhausting, and thus generalization number three may be here left, to suggest whatever it will.

So much, then, for the first three generalizations, which attempt to relate the processes, the factors, and the directions of effect. It is hardly germane, at this juncture, to belabor generalizations four and five. They serve only to recognize residual categories. Thus number four merely points out that some persuasive or quasi-persuasive effects do appear, at least to our present state of knowledge, to be direct. The apparently unmotivated learning of sufficiently repeated facts or slogans is a case in point. And generalization number five merely points out that the persuasive efficacy of the media is known to be affected by numerous variables pertaining to the content, the medium itself, or the communication situation—by such matters, for example, as the number and order of topics, the degree of repetition, the likelihood of distraction, the objective possibilities of action, and the like. The proposed schemata suggests that these variables are of a different and residual order as compared with the kind of *mediating* variables which we have just been discussing.

We have thus far been laboring to make and document three points, viz., (1) the set of generalizations is supported by our knowledge of the effects of persuasive communications; (2) the generalizations organize, or bring into logical relation, or, if you will, "predict" in an *a posteriori* sense, a large portion of that knowledge; and (3) in so ordering the data they simultaneously suggest new and logically related avenues for further research.

It is proposed that the same set of generalizations is similarly applicable to other types of communication effect. To spell this out in detail is beyond the scope of a single paper.[54] It may be well for the sake of the argument, however, to at least suggest the applicability of the generalizations to one other area, the effects of mass communication upon levels of public taste.

[54] A forthcoming book by the present author, tentatively scheduled for publication in 1958, will attempt to indicate the degree to which the schemata is applicable to a much wider array of effects.

THE GENERALIZATIONS APPLIED: EFFECTS ON TASTE

Reinforcement. It has been long known that the media do not seem to determine tastes, but rather to be used in accordance with tastes otherwise determined. The typical audience member selects from the media's varied fare those commodities which are in accord with his existing likes, and typically eschews exposure to other kinds of material. His existing likes, in turn, seem largely to derive from his primary, secondary, and reference groups, although they are not uncommonly affected by his special personality needs.[55] Whatever their origin, they intervene between the audience member and the vast array of media fare, and between the specific content and his interpretation of it.[56] The media stimuli are thoroughly sifted and molded, and they serve, typically, as grist for the existing mill. Put in a now familiar way, the effects of mass communication are mediated, and the media serve as contributing agents of reinforcement.

Changes. But the media are also associated with changes in taste. Oddly enough, little attention has been paid to the one change which occurs continually—the changing tastes of growing children. Wolf and Fiske seem to be the only researchers who explicitly noted that the pattern of development in children's comic book preferences precisely parallels the changing needs of their developing personalities,[57] as expressed, for example, in games. And no one, to the author's knowledge, has ever pointed out that the pattern of development in comic book and TV preferences also parallels the previously characteristic patterns of development in regular reading preferences. In short, the development and its integral changes in taste are culturally wholly catholic. In terms of our present set of generalizations, this is to say that such mediating variables as personality, cultural norms, and peer group interests impel the media to function as contributory agents of taste change.

The media have also been observed, although rarely, to play a role in elevating the tastes of adults. Suchman, for example, investigated the previous habits of some 700 persons who regularly listened to classical music broadcasts, and found that in the case of 53 per cent the radio had either "initiated" their interest in music or had "nursed" a mild but previously little exercised interest. But—and here is the essential point—the radio had functioned in almost all of these cases not as a necessary and sufficient cause, but as an "energizing agent" or implementer of tendencies otherwise engendered. The so-called initiates had been urged to listen by friends, or in some cases fiancés, whose tastes they respected and whose good opinion they sought, or by their

[55] E.g., Lazarsfeld (1940), pp. 21-47; Wiebe (1952), pp. 185 ff.; Macoby (1954); Johnstone and Katz (1957).

[56] For a curious demonstration of primary-type groups affecting *interpretation* of content, see Bogart (1955).

[57] Wolf and Fiske (1949).

own belief that a taste for classical music would increase their social prestige.[58] The mediating factors, in short, were at it again.

The literature on taste effects is relatively sparse, and seems to offer no illustration of changes which could be ascribed to the forces of stasis being inoperative. It might be conjectured that such effects occur among extreme isolates, but the possibility seems never to have been investigated.

In any case, our two generalizations which regard both reinforcement and change as essentially products of mediating factors account for virtually all of the hard data on the effect of mass communication on public taste. The generalizations furthermore suggest that the data are neither contradictory nor anomalous, but logically related. Stasis, reinforcement, developmental patterns, and individual change appear as different but understandable and predictable products of the same machines.

Residual Matters. There remains a certain residuum of related data and respectable conjecture for which the generalizations do not account. They do not explain why tastes in the development of which media has played a large role tend to have a sort of pseudo-character—why music lovers whose passions have been largely radio-nurtured, for example, appear to be peculiarly interested in the lives of composers and performers, and to lack real depth of musical understanding.[59] Nor do the generalizations cover the phenomenon of media *created* pseudo-interests, about which much speculation exists. McPhee has noted, for example, that the tremendous availability of newscasts seems to have created in some people an addiction, an ardent hunger which is sated by the five-minute newscast, despite its lack of detail and regardless of its irrelevance to the addict's life and interests. McPhee notes a similar passion for big-league baseball results, even among people who have never been in a ball park nor even seen a game on TV.[60] Meyersohn regards this sort of thing as an indication that media create their own common denominators of national taste.[61]

We know little about this phenomenon. Perhaps it is a direct effect, or perhaps it involves mediators as yet unspotted. In any case, deeper understanding seems likely to come from what we have called the phenomenistic approach—from an inquiry into the functions which such addiction serves

[58] Suchman (1941).

[59] E.g., Suchman (1941), pp. 178 f.; Lazarsfeld (1940), p. 255; Bogart (1949). The generalizations are *relevant* to this phenomenon, in that such extramedia forces as the urging of friends are necessary causes of the changed tastes. But there is nothing in the generalization to *account* for the stoppage. There is no reason to assume that extra-media forces which impel the media toward wreaking particular effects also limit the extent of the effect, and in reference to the Suchman data there is not even any reason to presume that people who urge others to listen to good music are themselves possessed of "pseudo-tastes."

[60] McPhee (1953). The comment in footnote 59 is equally applicable here.

[61] Meyersohn (1957), pp. 352-4.

for the addict, and into the role of the media in creating or serving the addiction.

APPLICATION TO OTHER FIELDS

We have now considered the extent to which the proposed generalizations are applicable to existing data regarding the effects of mass communication on opinions and attitudes, and upon levels of taste. It is proposed that they are equally applicable to questions about the effect of specific types of media fare, such as fantasy or depictions of crime and violence, on the psychological orientations and behavior of the audience. In the interests of brevity, these other areas of effect will not be discussed, except to note that the classic studies, both old and new, seem particularly suggestive. The old studies of soap opera listeners by Warner and Henry[62] and Herzog,[63] for example, and the more recent and differently focused work of the Rileys and of Maccoby,[64] all relate such variables as group orientation and personality needs to media use and media effects. They speak, implicitly and explicitly, of the *functions* served by media, and of the role of the media in effects of which they are not the sole cause.

SUMMATION AND CONCLUSIONS

It is time now to look quickly back over the ground we have covered, and to evaluate the set of generalizations which have been proposed—to inquire into what they have enabled us to do, and to note their weaknesses.

On the positive side, they appear to serve three major functions:

First, as this paper has been at some pains to demonstrate, the generalizations have permitted us in some measure to organize, or to account for, a considerable number of communications research findings which have previously seemed discrete, at times anomalous, and occasionally contradictory. The author submits, tentatively and with due humility, that the schemata has in fact made possible organization of several different orders:

. . . it has enabled us to relate the *processes* of effect and the *direction* of effect, and to account for the relative incidence of reinforcement and of change.

. . . it has provided a concept of the process of effect in which both reinforcement and change are seen as related and understandable outcomes of the same general dynamic.

. . . it has enabled us to view such diverse phenomena as audience predispositions, group membership and group norms, opinion leadership, personality patterns, and the nature of the media in this society, as serving similar functions in the process of effect—as being, if you will, all of a certain order, and distinct from such other factors as the characteristics of media content.

[62] Herzog (1944).
[63] Warner and Henry (1948).
[64] Riley and Riley (1951) and Maccoby (1954).

. . . it has enabled us to view such other unrelated phenomena as monopoly propaganda, new issues, and role-playing as manifestations of the same general process—as specific combinations of known variables, the outcomes of which were predictable.

So much for the organizational capabilities of the media. But note that this organization of existing data, even within so sketchy a framework as these generalizations provide, permitted us to see gaps—to discover, for example, that certain presumed outcomes have to date been neither documented nor shown not to occur. And thus the second contribution: the generalizations seem capable of indicating avenues of needed research, which are logically related to existing knowledge. Put another way, even this simple schemata seems capable of contributing to the cumulatibility of future research findings. This is in no way to gainsay that future thought and research must inevitably change the generalizations themselves. As presently formulated, they constitute only a single tentative step forward, and their refinement or emendation seems more likely to enlarge than to reduce the area of their applicability.

Finally, it is in the extent of this applicability, coupled with the foetal nature of the generalizations, that the author finds particular bases for hope. Sketchy and imperfect as they are, these propositions regarding the process and direction of effect seem applicable to the effects of persuasive communications, to the effects of mass communication on public taste, and, though it has not here been demonstrated, to the effects of specific media fare upon the psychological orientations and overt behavior patterns of the audience. Furthermore, the mediating variables to which they point—variables such as predisposition, group membership, personality patterns and the like—seem to play essentially similar roles in all these various kinds of effect. Even if these generalizations turn out to be wholly in error—and certainly they are imperfect—they seem nevertheless sufficiently useful and sufficiently applicable to justify the faith that *some* generalizations can in due time be made.

These particular generalizations, however, do not usher in the millenium. They are imperfect, and underdeveloped; they are inadequate in scope, and in some senses they are dangerous.

They do not, for example, cover the residuum of direct effects except to note that such effects exist. They are less easy to apply, and perhaps inapplicable, to certain other broad areas of effect, such as the effect of the existence of the media on patterns of daily life, on each other, and on cultural values as a whole. We have here spoken of cultural values as a mediating factor, which in part determines media content, but certainly some sort of circular relationship must exist, and media content must in turn affect cultural values.

Such concepts suggest what is perhaps the greatest danger inherent both

in these generalizations and in the approach to communications research from which they derive. And that is the tendency to go overboard in blindly minimizing the effects and potentialities of mass communication. In reaping the fruits of the discovery that mass media function amid a nexus of other influences, we must not forget that the influences nevertheless differ. Mass media of communication possess various characteristics and capabilities distinct from those of peer groups or opinion leaders. They are, after all, media of *mass* communication, which daily address tremendous cross-sections of the population with a single voice. It is neither sociologically unimportant nor insignificant that the media have rendered it possible, as Wiebe has put it, for Americans from all social strata to laugh at the same joke,[65] nor is it insignificant that total strangers, upon first meeting, may share valid social expectations that small talk about Betty Furness or Elvis Presley will be mutually comprehensible. We must not lose sight of the peculiar characteristics of the media, nor of the likelihood that of this peculiar character there may be engendered peculiar effects.

In any case, the most fruitful path for the future seems clear enough. It is not the path of abstract theorizing, nor is it the path, which so many of us have deserted, of seeking simple and direct effects of which media are the sole and sufficient cause. It appears rather to be the path of the phenomenistic approach, which seeks to account for the known occurrence and to assess the roles of the several influences which produced it, and which attempts to see the respondents not as randomly selected individuals each exchangeable for the other, but rather as persons functioning within particular social contexts. It is likewise the path of the cumulating controlled experiments in which the multifarious extra-media factors being investigated are built into the research design. These are the paths which have brought us to what seems the verge of generalization and empirically documented theory. They are the paths which have brought us to the brink of hope.

[65] Wiebe (1952).

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