

NOTES AND DISCUSSION

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SOCIOLOGY OF INFORMATION AND RADIO-TELEVISION

The sociology of information, as a study of the functional correlation between social settings and aspects of learning, is bound to be interested in dissemination techniques and methods. The latter are in the process of being considerably transformed, and their effects in the area in question are all the more important in view of their greater, more pervasive power of penetration and their entirely different and original means of presenting cognitive messages.

From that point of view the most remarkable occurrence in our civilization is undoubtedly the extension of audio-visual techniques, particularly radio and television. It is true one might try to minimize the novelty of the fact with the objection that the spread of information by courses and lectures is simply enlarged by radio, and that, on the other hand, television merely multiplies the possibilities of the cinema. But these analogies, though real enough, are eclipsed on a sociological plane by fundamental differences. First of all, an oral message transmitted

Translated by Sidney Alexander.

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by waves puts its author in very different conditions from those in which the lecturer and professor find themselves. For in the latter case, the speakers are face to face with their audience and can follow its reactions or even carry on discussions with it. In the case of wireless tele-communication the rapport between the broadcaster and receiver is in one direction, and the first does not know the second, except for some indirect, fragmentary, and deferred information gathered from opinion polls or letters. Furthermore, there is a difference which equally applies to cinema: that is, that the radio and television public is dispersed. Certainly one can find exceptions to that, for example, teleclubs which group a certain number of spectators in front of the little screen. But as surveys carried out under the aegis of UNESCO by Mr. Dumazedier have demonstrated, almost all of these spectators want to have a television set at home. In fact, the reception of a radio broadcast or televised message is almost entirely or tends to be radically individual or familial. The receiving set is above all an apparatus in the home, which one turns on when one wants to without disturbing oneself, even while choosing (when that's possible) the desired program. Finally, contrary to most means of spreading information, that which is effectuated by waves abolishes all obstacles of time and space; this type of diffusion is instantaneous and omnipresent.

In order to recognize its proper importance and specific qualities, it would perhaps not be useless to retrace very briefly the evolution of the means of mass communication.

In archaic civilizations, audio-visual techniques are indispensable. Among primitive peoples today, as in prehistoric times, stone engravings or paintings complement the ritual dramatization and oral transmission of myths which are themselves a focussing of the quintessence of knowledge and the fundamental bases of all kinds of information, as the work of the ethnographers, particularly Marcel Griaule, has demonstrated. But it must be clearly observed that the principle of this propagation is repetition, and its end is sacrilization. In this system, to know is to tie up objects and beings again with reproduceable archetypes.

The invention of writing is undoubtedly not the only determining factor in the passage from archaic civilization to the culture of historic and Promethean societies; but it uncontestedly

was a powerful accelerator in that evolution, which clearly demonstrates the importance of propagation techniques in the process of social change. Whatever is fixed by writing can be objectified and conceptualized. The *logos* imposed and spread abroad in this manner was preparing to encroach seriously upon mythical knowledge. But for a long time, writing remained limited to the élites, and audio-visual dramatization continued to nourish and above all maintain mass culture.

The invention, or more precisely, perfection of printing by Gutenberg in the 15th century, of course did not at one fell swoop open popular access to written documentation. But the new technique very quickly offered the masses the temptation of benefitting from it. Thus it is that despite the great number of illiterates, one could characterize the period beginning with the Renaissance as a "civilization of the book." The audio-visual tradition took refuge in art and folklore. On the cognitive level it seemed like a domain reserved for uncultivated classes, in comparison with the knowledge of the literati. True knowledge then is what is found in books and which at least may be transcribed in writing even if it is orally transmitted.

The power and rapid extension of electronic means of communication by sound and image marks, therefore, a new stage in cultural evolution. Certain pessimistic thinkers do not even hesitate to say that the civilization of the book is in the process of disappearing and that by a regressive process humanity is going to return to the civilization of the sound and image, under the conjunctive influence of radio, television, cinema and the illustrated press. In any event there can be no serious question of a return to archaic culture. After having emphasized the importance of propagation techniques in the evolutionary phenomena dealt with by the sociology of information, we must now indicate the scope of their action. Knowledge which is broadcast or telecast cannot be entirely different than that which one learns from books. For this knowledge too must go to the fountainhead which is scarcely touched by the very nature of the new means of popularization.

However, it might be that audio-visual broadcasting at a distance has its own characteristics and imposes certain peculiarities on the culture which it spreads. Beginning with a cognitive

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base which remains essentially faithful to the civilization of the book, it exercises an effect on the masses which can be very different from that of traditional teaching. Certainly this poses an entirely new problem for sociology. It is of particular importance to know what are the diverse publics on which it exercises its influence, how it favors such and such a form for each of these, and such and such a kind of communication, and how it is likely to orientate their minds. Not being able to treat so vast a problem adequately, here we are simply going to try to touch on two points of view, first drawing some conclusions from available data on the listening and viewing public and on its attitudes with regard to information spread in this way, and secondly, analysing the particular conditions of this communication and its cultural effect.

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It is sufficient to quote some figures to prove the importance of the problem. From 1949 to 1960 the number of radio receiving sets in operation in the world rose from 150 million to 370 million. In 1948 television existed in only four countries; in 1961 it may be found in almost 70 countries, with a total of almost 100 million receivers. And this latter figure is growing by around 10,000 sets per day. In the United States in 1961 there already existed one television set for an average of every three persons. At the same time, more than eleven million French families had television at home, as against only sixty thousand in 1952.

What are the categories and more particularly, the social classes affected by this evolution. It would be boring and besides of very little use to our purpose to enumerate the many studies dedicated to this subject. The essential phenomenon has been summed up excellently by Mr. Georges Friedmann: roughly, and in almost all countries, the penetration of radio and television does not take place horizontally, that is, passing from one social level to another, as for example, was the case with the automobile, but vertically, through all classes at the same time.¹

¹ Georges Friedmann, "Introduction aux aspects sociologiques de la radio-télévision (in *Cahiers d'études de Radio-Télévision*, 1955, No. 5), p. 8.

It is however necessary to make two slight modifications with regard to this remarkable and general conclusion. On the one hand, in fact, the still high price of television sets brings about some delay among the poorest categories; but it does not prevent them from having a desire to acquire a set. On the other hand, there has been observed everywhere in the world a rather lively resistance against the invasion of television among those whom it is convenient to call the intellectuals. In Belgium, for example, statistics reveal that the percentage of viewers is smaller among those persons having a university education than among those with only primary or secondary education. In France it is certain that the majority of the very cultivated public still sulks at the little screen.

In the USA, numerous authors (Swanson and Jones, Riley and Cantwell, Meyersohn) had already observed this phenomenon which at present is scarcely observable any more in those countries where the little screen has broken through all doors.

The reasons generally adduced in support of this hostile attitude, wherever it is observed, reveal a sharp awareness of certain dangers of which we will speak later on, as well as the fear of allowing oneself to be conquered by the fascination of the image and losing precious time. With regard to radio this reticence of the intellectuals manifested itself in the earliest days of wireless telegraphy; but today it is pretty nearly overcome.

It is important to note that the methods of collective communication, called *mass media* by American sociologists, all have more or less the same public. Thus, the mass of assiduous television viewers is principally drawn from among those people who make active use of their radios and attend cinema regularly and are large consumers of magazines. Let us finally observe that the progress of these new *mass media* is particularly rapid in those areas of strong demographic concentration.

From the microsociological point of view, the radio and television publics present all the characteristics which have been called *mass*. On the other hand, one may conceive of them as forming a very feeble and partially structured, dispersed grouping at the heart of this global society. The existence of a specialized press, columns in newspapers and magazines, the formation of clubs and associations, the gathering of listeners' correspondence

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by the administration responsible for the broadcasts, the surveys undertaken by it, the role of certain molders of opinion (stressed by Lazarsfeld)—all this contributes toward lending this theoretical grouping a somewhat perceptible existence and almost the beginnings of a cohesion; nevertheless, obvious difficulties remain. Furthermore, it seems that the tendency toward structuralization is sharper among viewers than among the mass of radio listeners. Among the first group, this is manifest by the relatively much greater importance of unsolicited correspondence and replies to surveys, by the number of particularly interested groupings, by the space given for announcements or criticisms of television programs not only in the magazines *ad hoc* but also in the major weeklies. Television viewers have a certain awareness of their existence as a specific collectivity.

When one adopts the viewpoint of the sociology of information, it is of course useful to have an idea of the entire public touched by these new techniques of popularization; but it is necessary, above all, to know which broadcasts and telecasts win public favor by underhand methods, so to speak, and which programs the public actually takes a fancy to. That would suppose broad studies on a specific point, and on the other hand, a minute analysis of programming content. This work, in the main, still has to be done. But lacking such studies one can, at any rate, touch on the problem by calling particular attention to what has been called cultural broadcasts. In a sense, it is true, everything sent out by broadcasting stations has an important bearing on education, either for good or for evil, and has some cognitive content. But, although it might be vague, the expression that we have just used is not without significance; it applies only to those sequences which in the minds of their creators are principally designed to instruct. They correspond with a determined intention to teach something to a public. Whatever valid objections might be raised against the very notion of cultural broadcast, the term is useful and the sociologist dealing with communication is more likely to be better and more quickly informed if he concerns himself with a scientific or literary broadcast than if he poses problems concerning the coverage of a bicycle race. Therefore, to come at once to the essential point, without presuming to definitely limit the subject under discussion, let us

take up the concept in question: that is, all those transmissions which have been consciously intended by their authors to contain certain information either closely or remotely connected with those matters touching on traditional instruction. Culture does not necessarily mean didactic² and one may even say that purely scholastic broadcasts intended for institutions of public education are not representative of the cultural broadcasts on which studies dealing with the question have been made.

First of all let us take note of a study carried out by the *Centre National d'Etudes des Techniques de Diffusion Collective* in Belgium, which has the merit of being very recent and of synthesizing a number of studies. It touches on radiophonic listening. Insofar as it deals with scientific broadcasts, this scarcely varies according to social classes. As for literary programs, there is a slightly higher percentage among well-to-do groups than elsewhere. But the differences are sharpest with regard to the level of instruction for cultural broadcasting in general. These have a much more widespread audience among people of university background than among those of only secondary schooling, and they are much less followed by the public which has only an elementary school education. Most of the studies undertaken in other countries show analagous results. Age differences equally play a role. According to Mrs. Himmelweit's study in Great Britain³ children voluntarily switch away from educational telecasts if they have a choice among television programs. Those surveys which we ourselves have carried out reveal a high proportion of well-to-do people among the regular listeners of the French cultural network stations.

The public for cultural broadcasts, whether on radio or television (at least when a choice exists among several programs) is clearly a minority. However, it is far from being negligible, and a number of sometimes surprising findings prove it. In the United States the success of some radio broadcasts having an educational character is such that public advertising firms do not hesitate to finance them liberally. In the same country television

² With regard to this subject, see Roger Clause, *L'éducation par la radio* (Unesco, 1949), pp. 11-12.

³ H. T. Himmelweit, *Television and the Child* (London, 1958), p. 138.

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has had several significant experiences. Since the so-called "commercials" of the program begin at seven o'clock in the morning, the idea has arisen to make use of the little screen at six-thirty a.m. for transmitting a New York University literature course on Stendhal. Despite the inconvenient hour the program was so successful that Stendhal's books were rapidly exhausted in all the bookshops of the city. In Western Germany, a third educational program was tried out in 1954; surveys showed that the number of listeners was about 150,000.

From all the information that we have regarding the audience for cultural broadcasts, it must be definitely maintained that the thirst for learning is perhaps more widespread than is generally believed, and on the other hand, that in this domain one might say: appetite comes by eating. There are those educated people who are seeking to widen their knowledge; and there are those who though at first refractory to the educational use of their spare time, end, once their intellectual curiosity has been aroused, by taking an interest in things of the mind. Radio and television therefore can develop the desire to learn.⁴

This conclusion seems confirmed by various studies concerning the effects which these new means of communication can have on reading. It is known that transmissions devoted to books generally result in raising the number of sales. But, this fact can be largely interpreted as a banal consequence of publicity. More interesting are the two following findings. On the one hand, people who have just acquired a television set read less than before; then, after a certain time they go back to reading. On the other hand, in this return to written sources a qualitative transformation has been observed.

In particular, light fiction as well as illustrated magazines lose ground.⁵ It must be remembered that television viewers are mainly recruited from among consumers of mass media. In the new use of leisure magazine and worthless novels are naturally sacrificed as well as the movies and radio. On the whole, even after the

⁴ Cf. in particular Meyersohn (in Rosenberg, *Mass Culture*, Free Press, 1954), p. 345 ff.; Himmelweit, *op. cit.*, pp. 38, 46, 362; R. Clausse, *op. cit.*, p. 16; Siepmann, *Télévision et éducation aux Etats-Unis* (Unesco, 1952), p. 64 ff.

⁵ Cf. Bogart, *The Age of Television* (New York, 1956), p. 132 ff.; Himmelweit, *op. cit.*, p. 321 ff.

initial period, viewers have perhaps less time to read than others. But they read more for self-instruction, to satisfy a thirst for learning which has been developed in them. Technical books and works of information are the beneficiaries of this change.

These are the broadest generalizations which may be deduced from the studies made in various countries on the radio and television public, on its attitude with regard to information transmitted by these means and on its cultural attitudes in general. Now let us try to see what these communication techniques can bring to this public and what is their influence on such popularized information.

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First of all, radio and television, it seems to us, differ from other communication media in a number of shared details which enable us to consider both of them together as a single global phenomenon in the process of cultural evolution. But when one comes to analyse their influence on the cognitive content and the sociological particularities of their operation in this domain, the respective characteristics of these two techniques must first be made clear. They differ one from the other for numerous reasons, partly occasional and partly essential.

In many countries, television has a much more limited public than radio; and besides it offers to that public only a single program while the radio listener has the possibility of choosing not only among several networks of his country but also of tuning in on foreign stations. These differences most likely, will diminish and might even disappear.

There are other differences, on the contrary, which derive from the very nature of the communication technique, especially from the fact that television adds the image to the sound. From this, both psychological and sociological consequences result.

As a general rule, television reception is familial, while radio listening tends to be individual for the most part. However, it has been noted that in France this second phenomenon was less pronounced than in Anglo-Saxon countries, undoubtedly because the little screen, more widely prevalent here than there, is the main cause, together with the development of transistor sets, of radiophonic individualism.

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From the psychological point of view these differences have special bearing on attentiveness, memory and imagination when it is a question of transmitting information. Radio can be listened to with a distracted ear. Of course, one can lend undivided attention to it but this is not always the case. It finally comes to be only a sonorous background or else, even while being interested in the words issuing from the radio, the listener devotes himself to some other occupation, manual for example. On the contrary, television mobilizes both principal senses and almost completely captures the attention. Sometimes the image stands out conspicuously against the sonorous ground, sometimes the sound is in the forefront; but in both cases the audio-visual combination scarcely allows for any distraction. Certainly, when one remains for a long time before the little screen one can get used to this sonorous and imagined tide; but then it becomes a question of a state of somnolence rather than a liberation of one's attention towards other objects.

Experiences have shown that the effect of television on memory is also greater. For example, J. Carvahal Ribes showed a group of children the story of Abraham Lincoln's life made up of filmed sequences and sequences orally recounted, and he determined that at the end of the year the visualized passages had been retained by 78% of the subjects while almost everyone had forgotten what they had simply heard.

On the other hand, as far as imagination is concerned, radio is more stimulating than television. The first can only suggest images and in this realm leaves a great deal of activity to the mind. While as a result of the fact that the visual image is more "pregnant" than others, television imposes a great passivity.

In a general sense television has more psychological power than radio: the power of fascination of the image is well known. Furthermore, the televised message is rather concrete while the radio message is rather abstract.

As far as kinds of information favored by one or another of these techniques are concerned, opinion surveys which we have been able to make confirm what simple common sense might easily assume, resulting from the foregoing considerations. Communication by sound conquers in the realm of philosophical and abstract scientific information. Television is important in

technical knowledge or the applied sciences (medicine and biology, for example), in the perceptive knowledge of the external world and of one's neighbors, and the understanding of various societies. In these matters, it may reveal itself superior to books.

Having distinguished between these particular aspects which are proper to radio and television, what are their characteristics and effects in general from the point of view of the sociology of information? Let us study in turn the elements and the general conditions of their action.

The most remarkable elements may be classed in three groups: stereotypes, models and symbols.

The reception of a message transmitted by waves clashes, first of all, against preexisting stereotypes, which may produce resistance or distortion of the information. Among children, for example, Mrs. Himmelweit noted that reactions to a telecast vary considerably according to whether the subjects are primarily attached to the familial group or to the group of their friends (peer group). Among adults, various groups and classes may play a determining role. One must take account of prejudices and snobbism. An experiment of Geiger in Denmark showed that a classical concert obtained twice as many listeners when it was announced as popular music. Probably in another social milieu an inverse result might be obtained.

If the value of radio or televised transmissions is conditioned in part by previous stereotypes, these transmissions themselves create or propagate other stereotypes. The various forms of information spread by these means are themselves derived from a previously given cultural milieu. Therefore, it would be useful to develop a sociology dealing with producers: studying their formation, their conception of culture and also their attitude toward the public. This last point touches on a very particular aspect of our understanding of others. Producers having only fragmentary knowledge of their public might very well be guided by stereotypes in the selections they make for it. And in turn, listeners and viewers might be influenced by these choices. Perhaps as a result of this stimulus they have been led to resemble the image which the producers have of them, unless their tastes and judgments in other instances do not simply react contrariwise.

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National stereotypes have also been observed in the general concept of transmissions. Thus in France the commentary is organized around a shock image while in British television the contrary is the rule: the images serve as illustration and complement to the spoken text.⁶

The study of models as well as standards in radio broadcast or televised cognitive messages calls for detailed research which has not yet been carried out. However, studies of stereotypes partly cover this ground. And another no less important part would be furnished by an analysis of the role of individuals. For information transmitted by waves is essentially personalized. It is true that this characteristic is not strictly limited to these media: the same influence makes itself felt in courses and conferences. But in radio, and still more in television, a phenomenon manifests itself which has already been developed by the cinema, and called, for want of a better term, the "star system." This is the emotional valorization of an individual by the mass. To some degree, the star corresponds to the bearer of *mana* in archaic societies. On the part of the public, this favors the process of projection and identification. One's understanding of other people is markedly changed by it. As for other kinds of knowledge, including, needless to say, political knowledge, these also might be affected by this valorization which the star sheds upon the message which it might be transmitting.

The "star system" already leads us into the realm of symbols, for the personality presenting the transmission might itself act as a symbol, for instance, the scholar or literary figure. Wave-transmission besides, makes use of numerous other symbols. On radio, these are principally "illustrations in sound," and on television, the extensive use of maps. Recourse to symbolization always more or less resuscitates certain notions and processes of archaic mentality by appealing for participation. In this way, word and image reassume their immemorial magical power.

These particular characteristics of mass transmission at a distance which distinguish it from transmission of knowledge by book or direct oral teaching, would seem to be even more

⁶ J. d'Arcy, "L'avenir de la Télévision" (*Recherches et débats du Centre catholique des intellectuels français*, 33, Dec. 1960), p. 111.

pronounced if, after the elements of their operation, we come to examine the general conditions. Two pairs of apparently contradictory modalities here stand out: relaxation and tension, continuity and discontinuity.

For most users, radio and television are set within a determined context: leisure-time activities. Therefore, when the problem of transmission of knowledge is under consideration, it must not be forgotten that the listener and viewer do not necessarily have the attitude of someone studying at school. Now the reception of knowledge by a relaxed mind naturally favors that kind of thought which C. G. Jung compared with primitive mentality (such as Lévy-Bruhl described it) in contrast with "direct thought." Objectivizing rational thought necessarily involves a state of tension, and that is why, Lévy-Bruhl said, when we want to rest from this effort, we let ourselves go, yielding to an intellectual state of mind favorable to the reflux of archaic mentality. Obviously this abandon is greater or less great according to the mental habits which it must neutralize, and consequently according to the level of pre-existing culture.

But on the other hand there is a spatial and temporal tension in the very context of radio and television transmissions. All audio-visual communication involves dramatization. That is inevitable. Even in a live, not "tricked up" transmission, the people participating in it are aware of being actors on stage. And, of course, in order to make his show more striking, the producer stresses everything which seems of particular interest to him. Here also, time is cut, action is piled up. In the simple direct transmission of an important event, attention is fixed on certain selected elements, the continuity being reestablished by the announcer. Kurt and Gladys Lang have shown, for example, how *MacArthur's Day*, in Chicago appeared to the spectators of the little screen as a much more crowded spectacle than that which was offered the idlers in the street. Now the same phenomenon is produced when an ethnographic voyage or a surgical operation is transmitted. Space is equally modified, concentrated. Distances having been abolished, a universe without real dimensions is created. In effect, a fictive world is taken for reality. And that leads us back once more to certain characteristics of primitive mentality. Here again, let us clearly state, the effect in question differs to

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the degree that the cultural and social milieu develops a critical spirit in the receiving subject. The atmosphere of fiction or surrealism in which wave-transmitted information is bathed runs the risk of provoking a regression only if it is not recognized as such.

Radio and television possess the quality of continuous utterance. They are machines for pouring out sounds and images. They do not offer the possibility of a reflective pause, of a moment for assimilation, of turning back, of re-reading. That sweeps television viewers, even more than radio listeners, off into an exclusively receptive attitude. It can even result in a sort of fascination and sensorial overworking. On the other hand, intellectual activity is slowed down and the mind is more inclined to let itself be "mystified".

But this continuity of utterance is compensated for by the discontinuity resulting from the brevity and lack of coordination of the transmissions. Let us not particularly blame the producers or network directors. The rapid change of sequences is indispensable. A program organized like the teaching at a university would not be supportable. Even a single cultural broadcast or telecast cannot develop in the same way for very long. A book read on radio will not hold many listeners. Besides, even if such a radio or television network should decide rationally to coordinate its cultural transmissions, the viewer or listener always has the possibility of "switching programs" and bringing himself back to a state of incoherence. Popularization by wave transmission is therefore essentially fragmentary and if it is not supported by any other educational factor, it inevitably produces what one might call a rhapsodic culture.

Finally the danger is that the absence of traditional culture and critical spirit might lead people to believe that odds and ends of poorly assimilated knowledge, cut off from real time and space, excessively dramatized, form a total and objective body of knowledge.

The true vocation of radio and television in the cognitive sphere is therefore to awaken the taste for learning and for further knowledge. In the long run everything depends on the follow-up given to the audio-visual message. Above all, the stimulus must not remain on the level of illusion but must be

integrated within the cultural framework. On this condition, radio and television's contribution to our society can be positive, for it offers two advantages: in giving leisure an orientation *sui generis*, it can combat overspecialization and substitute a desire toward self-instruction, for the self-abnegation of the uninformed. In effect, the main sociological result of the extension of these new methods of communication with regard to culture and knowledge, is the lowering of several barriers: those between classes, between the capital and the provinces, between city and country. This victory over isolation is perhaps more moral than effective. However, the essential thing is that it has become conceivable.

But if one wants this rupture of certain social obstacles not to lead to anarchy, there must be cultural frameworks in pace with this change, in order that traditional culture might be widened and not compromised, that it might provide orientation to those who are curious, and that it might develop the critical spirit. Therein lies a problem of equilibrium between changing social structures and technical progress which is perhaps moving ahead more quickly and runs the risk of leaving them behind.