

THE AMBIGUOUS MIRROR

The Reflective-Projective Theory of Broadcasting and Mass Communications

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IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY more people spend more time in communication than in any other waking activity. If there ever was a period when man spent more time manipulating physical objects rather than symbols it is irretrievably past for us. Even in our organization of work we now have more white collar than blue collar workers, and our leisure time activities have long since become predominantly vicarious and communicative rather than manipulative and participant.

However, communications in this sense is a very broad concept. Communications includes talking, from gossiping to lecturing, reading and writing, including reading and writing of numbers and figures, bookkeeping and accounting, scanning newspapers and magazines, perusing books, chatting on the telephone, attending the theater, listening to radio, and watching television. Obviously, this includes many diverse activities.

Communication by talking is the oldest of our means of communication and probably is nearly as old as the human race. There is no means of dating the origin of spoken language, but scientists estimate that it is probably at least one hundred thousand years old. Primitive writing first developed in pictographs and ideographs which conveyed ideas by literal representation and which developed at least ten thousand years ago. Gradually these evolved into signs, into syllabic

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systems, and finally into alphabets. Primitive word writing is probably six thousand years old, and writing with words formed of letters is at least three thousand years old. We can trace the history of the Greek alphabet, which has survived essentially unchanged for about three thousand years.

However, during most of the period when mankind was developing these basic modes of communication the reach of communication was limited to the sound of the human voice and the mark of the human hand on tablet or paper. The beginning of mass communication is dated from the invention of printing. Although there are reports of the use of wooden blocks to print religious scrolls in Korea as early as the eighth century A.D.,^{1*} the practical origin of printing traces to the production of the Bible by Johann Gutenberg in 1456. The art of printing developed rapidly in Europe during the latter half of the fifteenth century and the following years. Printing spread to the Western Hemisphere in the sixteenth century, with the establishment of a press in Mexico City; and printing came to North America about a century later. By the nineteenth century power presses and means of producing printing in volume were developed and the foundation of mass communication had been established.

THE ELECTRONIC REVOLUTION in communication came with the development of the telegraph, telephone, and radio. The first electrical telegraph instrument was constructed in Germany in 1833, and in 1844 Morse established a telegraph line from Washington to Baltimore. By 1866 a transatlantic telegraph cable was in operation. In 1876 patent applications were filed for an electric telephone. In 1896 Marconi applied for the first patent on the method of transmitting messages by wireless, and in 1901 he sent a wireless signal across the Atlantic. By 1920 a number of radio stations had started broadcasting in this country and by 1927 this number had grown to many hundreds.

Television was developed experimentally before World War II but did not really develop on a widespread basis until

* All references are to be found at the end of the article.

about 1952, when the effects of wartime shortages and the FCC freeze were finally ended. Development since that time has been rapid and is a matter of common knowledge.

Mass communication today, particularly radio and television, has become such a widespread and ubiquitous phenomenon that communication about mass communication has become a mass production enterprise itself. One can scarcely read a newspaper or magazine today without encountering a critique of the mass media in one aspect or another and one cannot listen long to radio without hearing some comment about television. However, when we search the literature for data or scholarship what we find is not impressive. There are innumerable critics of the mass media, especially broadcasting, a few objective observers, and almost no working scientists. Indeed the comments and arguments about broadcasting in general and in particular are at least as stereotyped as the programs.

Reviewing current commentary about broadcasting, there seems to be general agreement that broadcasting did an excellent job of covering the war in the Middle East. There has been some adverse criticism of broadcast coverage of recent urban riots, and there are a few instances of bad judgment or sensationalism. However, the predominant judgment was expressed by Senator Magnuson when he said: "These examples should not detract from the generally admirable service the broadcasting media performed during the urban disorders." ²

THE MORE COMMON COMMENT on broadcasting, however, is far more critical. The characteristic comment is that television represents a wonderful potential and a miserable reality.³ This is almost always based either on the critic's own subjective views or upon material gathered in response to a general invitation to readers of a particular column or journal to send their views in a letter to the columnist or editor. While all these people are surely entitled to hold any views they like and to express them freely, it must be clear that

neither the critics nor their pen pals necessarily represent the public.

The correspondence received by a particular critic, or even a particular magazine or newspaper, is not a "survey" in any scientific sense. To take such a sampling and report it as a survey is roughly equivalent to reporting the results of a survey taken on the steps of St. Peter's in Rome on Sunday morning regarding attitudes toward Christian Science, or reporting the views of a random sample found in the lobby of the Cairo Hilton as to the character or popularity of Moshe Dayan. Those who want to engage in such an exercise have a perfect right to do so, but the results cannot be taken seriously by anyone who has any knowledge of survey research or of science in general.

The most scientific investigation conducted to date of public attitudes towards television is still the Steiner study published in 1963. The findings were summarized by Lazarsfeld in these terms:

Dr. Steiner . . . found that a large number of respondents felt ambivalent about their amount of [television] viewing. They were ready to say that television is both relaxing and a waste of time. Their other leisure activities were not surrounded by such a haze of doubt; reading is elevating, playing golf is wholesome, and sitting in a bar is clearly wrong. Among the better-educated, he found a number of respondents who stated frankly that they felt they watched more than they should.⁴

Interestingly enough, this conclusion is corroborated by a recent study conducted by ITA in Great Britain. ITA conducted a study of the attitudes of managerial and professional classes toward television in 1965. The study concluded that these classes

by virtue of their educational and occupational background, tend more than the other social grades to have views about the meaningful use of time. They begin with reservations about television and the reservations are all the more likely to swell into irritation when they

are themselves weak enough, as they see it, to be drawn into spending a good deal of time watching entertainment on television. They feel that television ought to have a tremendous potential for "good," in the sense of spreading knowledge and enlightenment, though it also seems clear that in having this concept of television they are thinking of the good it ought to be doing to *other* people rather than to themselves.⁵

There are a few other studies, mostly reported in the periodical literature, and some general theoretical analyses of mass communication that I shall mention in a moment. However, there is no mass of empirical data from which we can derive any systemic view or functional theory of mass communications.

There is, of course, a vast body of literature to be found under various library classifications beginning with the term "communications." However, these fall into three major classifications, each of which involves an entirely different frame of reference and an essentially different subject matter.

WHEN WE ARE considering communications theory we must distinguish between the engineering or technical frame of reference, the economic, and the semantic. The engineering or technical frame of reference encompasses what is now known as "information theory" and has to do with the modes and instruments of encoding, transmitting, and decoding messages of all kinds. This may involve an analysis of the physical means utilized, which are the electronic devices; it may involve analysis of the psychological processes involved; or it may involve consideration of linguistic and other symbols as means of encoding and decoding information. Economic analysis has to do, of course, with the financial aspects of communications. The semantic aspect of mass communications is the one that is most discussed and least understood. This is the one that has to do with the meaning and significance of what is communicated, and it is this aspect with which the critics, and most of the theory builders, are concerned.

From an examination of the literature it seems to me that there have been five major theories about the semantic function of broadcasting. The first view of broadcasting was that it was a remarkable and somewhat unbelievable technology that had specialized uses and would affect the public mainly as a hobby. This hobby theory of broadcasting was widely held from about the time of World War I until the early 1930's. Although the hobby theory of broadcasting is clearly out-dated, it is still recalled fondly by those of us who used to wind coils on old Quaker Oats boxes, made condensers—or capacitors, as they are now called—from wax paper and tin foil, and used galena crystals as rectifiers.

In the early 1930's a great battle was fought between broadcasters and newspaper publishers over the right of broadcasting to transmit news.⁶ The details are now of only historical interest and the outcome is well known. For many years after that, and up to the present time, broadcasting has been thought by many to derive its social significance from its effectiveness as a journalistic medium.⁷ On occasion I have said that the journalistic function of broadcasting was its most important role. A Roper survey indicating that more people look to television as a source of news than to newspapers, and that a substantial number rely on radio, gives support to this view.⁸ Nevertheless, the journalistic theory of broadcasting seems to be more a normative view expressing what is thought to be the socially most important activity of the medium rather than an empirical view based on evidence encompassing all the functions broadcasting performs for its audience.

A third view that has gained some currency is the social reform view of broadcasting. This is the view held by people who see broadcasting as an immensely popular medium of communication, having a potentially vast influence and therefore offering an irresistible opportunity to achieve a variety of social goals and ideals. This is the official attitude in many countries, particularly those of the Communist world. In this country there are those who see broadcasting, particularly television, as a means of doing quickly and easily what home,

school, and church have been trying to do slowly and painfully for many years. This is the basic philosophy of those who feel that the FCC should exercise greater influence or control over broadcast programming.

THE ARGUMENT for government control of programming—whether extensive or limited—is usually ostensibly based upon the limitations of the spectrum and the consequent limitation of licensed broadcasting facilities. However, it is noteworthy that those who are most eager to set official program standards are also among those who support most strongly the limitation of channels of mass communication on the grounds of harmful competition with existing broadcasting facilities. Both the doctrine of the Carroll case⁹ and the rationale of the present CATV regulations are based upon limiting the channels of mass communication in order to protect presently licensed enterprises.¹⁰

Regardless of whether such protection is justified, these legal rules make nonsense of the argument that program control is necessary or warranted because spectrum limitations impose an artificial scarcity on station assignments. So long as we are unwilling to permit the public to get as much broadcasting service as technology can provide, we cannot rationally say that technology imposes limitations requiring us to exercise control of programs because of technological limitations. Thus the social reform theory rests on the values and assumptions of its advocates rather than on an empirical foundation.

In any event, whether or not broadcasting, and particularly television, is adapted to or capable of doing the work of social reform which some would have it undertake remains a question which is not answered merely by postulating the desirability of ideals to be achieved. The social reform theory needs a good deal more empirical investigation as well as philosophical analysis before it has any solid claim to acceptance.

A third theory of mass communications is the sense-extension theory of Marshall McLuhan. This has become one

of the most widely discussed theories of mass communication. It may be overstating the case to say that McLuhan presents a theory, since he is not a scientist and his ideas are expressed more as a series of disorganized observations than as a philosophical system. The widespread interest and popularity of McLuhan's publications really serves to demonstrate the paucity of original thinking in this field.¹¹ Nevertheless the insights that McLuhan contributes are sufficiently supported by observation to warrant attention. His significant views may be summarized by excerpts from his books:

Printing from movable type created a quite unexpected new environment—it created the PUBLIC. Manuscript technology did not have the intensity or power of extension necessary to create publics on a national scale. What we have called "nations" in recent centuries did not, and could not, precede the advent of Gutenberg technology any more than they can survive the advent of electric circuitry with its power of totally involving all people in all other people.

Print, in turning the vernaculars into mass media, or closed systems, created the uniform centralizing forces of modern nationalism.

[Individualism] is a meaningless principle where the uniform processing of minds by the habit of reading the printed word has not occurred. In a word, individualism, whether in the passive atomistic sense of drilled uniformed soldiery or in the active aggressive sense of private initiative and self-expression, alike assumes a prior technology of homogenous citizens. This scabrous paradox has haunted literate men in every age.

Print created national uniformity and government centralism, but also individualism and opposition to government as such.¹²

. . . in operational and practical fact, the medium is the message. This is merely to say that the personal and social consequences of any medium—that is of any extension of ourselves—results from the new scale that is introduced into our affairs by each extension of ourselves, or by any new technology.

. . . the medium is the message because it is the medium that shapes and controls the scale and form of human association and action. . . . For any medium has the power of imposing its own assumption on the unwary. . . . [O]ur human senses, of which all media are extensions, are also fixed charges on our personal energies, and . . . they also configure the awareness and experience of each one of us. . . .

There have been countless . . . men who know nothing about the form of any medium whatever. They imagine that a more earnest tone and a more austere theme would pull up the level of the book, the press, the movie and TV. They are wrong to a farcical degree. They have only to try out their theory for fifty consecutive words in the mass media of the English language. . . . Suppose we were to try for a few sentences to raise the level of our daily English conversation by a series of sober and serious sentiments? Would this be a way of getting at the problems of improving the medium?

. . . the critics of program "content" have talked nonsense about "TV violence." The spokesmen of censorious views are typical semiliterate book-oriented individuals who have no competence in the grammars of newspaper, or radio, or of film, but who look askew and askance at all non-book media. The simplest question about any psychic aspect throws these people into a panic of uncertainty. Vehemence of projection of a single isolated attitude they mistake for moral vigilance. Once these censors became aware that in all cases "the medium is the message" or the basic source of effects, they would turn to suppression of media as such, instead of seeking "content" control. Their current assumption that content or programming is the factor that influences outlook and action is derived from the book medium, with its sharp cleavage between form and content.

Each new technology creates an environment that is itself regarded as corrupt and degrading. Yet the new one turns its predecessor into an art form. When writing was new, Plato transformed the old oral dialogue into an art form. When printing was new the Middle Ages became the art form. "The Elizabethan world

view" was a view of the Middle Ages. And the industrial age turned the Renaissance into an art form . . . the electric age taught us how to see the entire process of mechanization as an art process.¹³

AN ENTIRELY DIFFERENT VIEW of mass communications has been offered by William Stephenson, a behavioral scientist, under the name of "the play theory of mass communication." Stephenson distinguishes play from work, with play being activity that is self-sufficient and pursued for the pleasure in it, while work is actively involving effort for a purpose regarded as gainful and to produce goods, services, ideas, or other ulterior objectives.

Stephenson's basic approach is a methodological one involving what is known as Q-methodology. This is a technique of investigating subjective attitudes in a manner that produces quantitative results that can be analyzed statistically. Simply stated, Q-methodology involves collecting a number of separate statements on a topic under investigation. A variety of such statements is then given to the respondents comprising the Q-sample with instructions to arrange the statements in order on the basis of how much the respondent agrees or disagrees, or believes or disbelieves the statements. Each respondent thus constructs his own scale of ordinal values describing his attitude toward the subject of investigation. The zero point is the same for all respondents, being indifference, and thus all scores in the system are comparable.

While this technique, like all techniques, has its limitations, it is one of the more original and potentially useful advances in behavioral science in recent decades. Not the least of its advantages is the opportunity it provides for making small sample surveys with more reliable and significant results than is possible by conventional questionnaire surveys.

Stephenson has used the Q-sort technique with factor analysis for a number of mass communications situations to develop and illustrate his theories. He distinguishes between social control, which comprises the devices society employs to establish involuntary categorical imperatives and secure con-

formity, and what he calls "convergent selectivity," which is the relative freedom of individual choice among alternatives.

Stephenson shows how his theories explain otherwise unnoticed or inexplicable phenomena. For example, he concludes that people read newspapers primarily for pleasure rather than information. As evidence he notes the fact that people read most avidly what they already know about. They go to a football or baseball game, then read about it in the newspaper. People look first in the newspaper to read about events they have been involved in and already know about. Furthermore, we read accounts of the same thing over and over again. This is because newspaper reading is play and involves the reader in projection, or self-identification as a story teller. Thus newspaper reading is an example of convergent selectivity, or voluntary activity, rather than of social control.

Similarly the mass media, plays, art, and the theatre generally offer opportunity for convergent selectivity, or communication pleasure, rather than work, which is communication effort or pain. Mass communication, he says, is best understood as being manipulated by its audiences, who thoroughly enjoy what they are being offered for the first time in man's history. The media are not manipulating or oppressing their audiences, and they should not make work out of what should be pleasure. In Stephenson's own words:

Social scientists have been busy, since the beginnings of mass communication research, trying to prove that the mass media have been sinful where they should have been good. The media have been looked at through the eyes of morality when, instead, what was required was a fresh glance at people existing in their own right for the first time. It is my thesis that the daily withdrawal of people into the mass media in their after hours is a step in the existential direction, that is, a matter of subjectivity which invites freedom where there had been little or none before.

The fill of mass communication is not a flight from

reality, escapism, or the like; nor is it debasing or seducing the masses as the critics suppose. Rather it is seen as a buffer against conditions which would otherwise be anxiety producing. Without question a constant barrage of political propaganda would find few listeners or viewers, or, if it found many, would arouse deep anxieties in an unsettled world.

The process of developing national character is no doubt basically rooted in social controls . . . , in which church, home, school, work, and all else mediate. But national character is also what a nation *thinks* of itself, as something to talk about, to sustain ongoing social or national conditions. It is best regarded as communication-pleasure, which has little effect on anything but gives self-satisfaction all around.¹⁴

It follows from this that separation of the elite from the culture at large creates a separatist culture within a country which bodes no one any good. What is most required for a national culture is something for everyone to talk about. The daily "fill" is far more important than the education of professionals. This is how social culture and character are formed, in songs, gossip, sports, dances, competition, or whatever is required to give people communication-pleasure.

Stephenson concludes that ". . . mass communication . . . should serve two purposes. It should suggest how best to maximize the communication-pleasure in the world. It should also show how far autonomy for the individual can be achieved in spite of the weight of social controls against him."¹⁵

Each of these theories of broadcasting has some element of validity in it. After all, theories are simply conceptual schemes that enable us to see and relate the various aspects of phenomena under examination. Theories enable us to understand observations and to predict and make reasonable inferences beyond observation. In this sense theories are not true or untrue but more or less useful. Each of the theories—hobby, journalistic, social reform, sense extension, and play—points to an aspect of mass communication by broadcasting that has some significance. The journalistic and social

reform theories focus on the medium and its message. The hobby, sense extension, and play theories focus on the audience and its reaction to the medium. However, none of these theories is entirely adequate to account for empirical data that can be easily observed.

THERE ARE at least half a dozen observable and important facts about broadcasting that I think must be encompassed and explained by any mass communications theory that we accept as adequate.

First, broadcasting is extremely popular with the public and attracts a larger audience than any other mass medium in history, both relatively and in absolute numbers. In some individual cases both radio and television seem to be truly addictive.

Second, the appeal of American-type broadcasting is universal. Even though much of our programming, such as TV westerns, is indigenous, it is popular throughout the world wherever there are broadcasting stations. Similarly American popular music has captured much of the world radio audience. Where state-controlled broadcasting systems have sought to use broadcasting for propaganda or educational purposes—and the difference is of interest to scholars rather than to audiences—they have been forced either by lack of audience or by competition from pirate, outside, or commercial stations to show more American or American-type programming; that is, primarily entertaining. This has been the case in countries as diverse as Britain, Holland, Yugoslavia, Russia, and Japan.

Third, during a period of increasing population, prosperity, and literacy, newspapers have not increased in number, and have declined in overall economic strength and competitive vitality, in Britain as well as in America, while reasonably reliable reports indicate that the general public relies more on television than on newspapers as a source of news.¹⁶ Broadcasting now performs the journalistic function for most of the public part of the time and for much of the public most of the time.

Fourth, broadcasting, especially television, arouses strong emotional reactions in most of those who either watch or listen and discuss it. In my experience no other subject, not even religion, arouses such quick and violent emotional response from people.

Fifth, broadcasting, particularly television, is largely rejected or denigrated by intellectuals and those who consider themselves intellectuals. Indeed, it is scarcely regarded as respectable to write or speak in public about television without deprecating its low intellectual estate.

Sixth, broadcasting has become a part of ordinary living in contemporary society in a way that no other mass medium or art form has approached. Television or radio is in the home, in the car, in the office, on the beach, on the street, and constantly in company with the majority of the population. Broadcasting is about as ubiquitous as printing and for many people is a far more intimate and constant companion. The theater, pictorial art, and either contemporary or classical literature are none of them a part of everyday living for most people; they are not really an element of our communal experience. Not even the newspapers are a component of our common culture in the sense that broadcasting has become.

ANY THEORY of broadcasting as mass communication must be consistent with and adequate to explain at least these data. Testing the five theories mentioned on this basis shows that none of them is wholly adequate.

The hobby theory is, of course, clearly outdated and is really quite inadequate to explain any of the observed data. The journalistic theory is somewhat more relevant and is at least consistent with the popularity of broadcasting, its journalistic function and, possibly, its place as a cultural component. However, the journalistic theory is not consistent with the universality of broadcasting programs, with the emotional involvement of the audience, or with the attitude of intellectuals toward the medium. The journalistic theory is partially empirical, but is also in part a normative judgment as to the function that broadcasting should be performing

rather than an empirical conclusion as to the function that it actually does perform or the need that it does meet. By its own terms, the journalistic theory is an incomplete account of broadcasting as mass communication.

The social reform theory explains the emotional involvement of those who either attack or defend broadcasting, as well as the attitude of the intellectual elite toward television. However, the social reform theory is not at all consistent with the popularity of broadcasting, with its universality, with its journalistic function, or with its observable role as a cultural component. The social reform theory must be judged to have very little empirical basis and to be almost wholly a normative ideal.

The sense extension theory of McLuhan seeks to be empirical rather than normative and is consistent with the popularity of broadcasting, its universality, and its role as a cultural component. McLuhan explains the emotional involvement of the television audience by saying it is a "cool" medium which conveys little information and so requires audience participation to provide the links necessary to complete the message. I find this unconvincing because the theory strains the observable facts and simply does not apply to radio. Further, the McLuhan theory is neither consistent with nor adequate to explain the journalistic function of broadcasting or the attitude of the intellectual group generally.

The play theory of Stephenson, similarly, is empirical and descriptive rather than normative. It is quite consistent with the popularity of broadcasting, with its universality and with its journalistic function. However the play theory is not adequate to explain the emotional involvement of the audience, the attitude of the intellectual elite, or the place of broadcasting as a cultural component.

A BROADER THEORY which seems to encompass all the aspects of broadcasting mentioned, as well as others, is what I call the *reflective-projective theory* of broadcasting and mass communication. This theory postulates that mass communications are best understood as mirrors of society that

reflect an ambiguous image in which each observer projects or sees his own vision of himself and society. This theory not only explains the observable facts about broadcasting better than the other theories but also differentiates the social and the individual aspects of the semantic significance of mass communications, which the other theories do not.

It is apparent that mass media reflect various images of society but not of the individual. However, broadcasting is not a simple, plane mirror but rather a telescopic mirror reflecting an image of what is distant and concentrating and focusing on points in a vast universe. Broadcasting is an electronic mirror that reflects a vague and ambiguous image of what is behind it, as well as of what is in front of it. While the mirror can pick out points and aspects of society, it cannot create a culture or project an image that does not reflect something already existing in some form in society. Further, the mirror can project an accurate or a distorted image and it can reflect an image that is very vague and ambiguous or one that is more clearly defined. These are matters of degree and there is always a significant amount of ambiguity in the image projected.

The ambiguous mirror of broadcasting obviously reflects not a single image but a variety of images of society, as it is turned toward one or another sector or aspect of society. As with a telescope or camera, the broadcasting mirror may be focused broadly or narrowly. So the reflective-projective theory, unlike the earlier theories, takes account of and allows for the variety of broadcasting. Educational television and what is now called public broadcasting help to present a broader, and therefore more complete reflection of society. However, this theory also warns us not to expect too much of educational television or public broadcasting. They can supplement and expand the broadcasting image, but, like conventional broadcasting, so long as they are mass media they can perform only a reflective-projective function and are most unlikely to become instruments of social reform or great public enlightenment.¹⁷

This view is consistent with observation of national dif-

ferences in broadcasting patterns. A substantial element of violence in American television reflects a tolerance and taste for violence in American society. This is somewhat offensive to Europeans, who have a different attitude toward violence, and there is less of violence in European broadcast programming. On the other hand, European television has fewer sex and religious taboos than American television and this corresponds to European attitudes, which are looser in these fields than American attitudes. Basically all mass media are censored by the public since they lose their status as mass media if they become too offensive or uninteresting to a large segment of the public.¹⁸

WHILE the mass media reflect various images of society the audience is composed of individuals, each of whom views the media as an individual. The members of the audience project or see in the media their own visions or images, in the same manner that an individual projects his own ideas into the inkblots of the Rorschach test or the pictures of the Thematic Apperception Test, commonly used by psychologists.¹⁹

Projection is a process that has been well known in psychology for many years. Essentially it consists of an observer attributing his own attitudes, ideas, or feelings to the perceptions he receives from the environment. There is some element of this in all perception. Perception itself is both selective and interpretative, as we never see all the details of any scene and necessarily interpret or impose preconceived patterns on our sensations when we perceive anything as having meaning.

All media, including those exalted by the term "art," offer selected sensations which provide the basis for individual interpretations that vary with intellectual, emotional, and sensory responses. What is pure story-telling to one may be allegory or metaphor to another. Well-known examples are such classics as *Gulliver's Travels*, *Alice in Wonderland*, and *Don Quixote*. However, it is not only literary classics that

have this mixed narrative-allegorical-metaphorical quality. A recent sociological study of television offers this comment:

Television series such as *Bonanza*, and *The Virginian*, and most popular films and fiction are in reality morality plays, that show how a hero confronts a moral dilemma and how he finally makes a moral choice. These dilemmas are often quite contemporary and controversial; I have seen *Bonanza*, one of the most popular TV programs, deal with questions of racial intolerance and inter-marriage, albeit in a 19th-century Western setting. Programs like *The Law and Mr. Jones*, *East Side/West Side*, and *The Defenders* have discussed pertinent social issues in contemporary settings, although they have been less popular from a rating standpoint. And even the innocuous family situation comedies such as *Ozzie and Harriet* deal occasionally with ethical problems encountered on a neighborhood level; for example, how to help the socially isolated child or the unhappy neighbor. Although the schools argue that they are the major transmitter of society's moral values, the mass media offer a great deal more content on this topic.²⁰

Thus, broadcasting is an electronic mirror reflecting an ambiguous image of its environment in which the audience sees its vision of society. This view explains the several aspects of broadcasting that have been noted above. It also points to another fact which is of substantial significance. In the field of communications media, technology reverses psychology in order of development. The technologically most advanced media are psychologically the most elementary and primitive. Psychologically man has advanced from simple sensation to perception, and then to abstraction which is expressed in gestures, sounds, symbols, verbal signs, and, finally, developed language.

Technologically, hieroglyphics were the first form of writing, and we have progressed from them to more sophisticated signs, to alphabet writing, to printing, followed by books and periodicals, and then through the electronic media from the telegraph to the telephone to radio and through the movies to television. The most highly abstract of the

technological media is alphanumeric writing, which requires considerable effort and interpretation by the reader. Speech conveyed by telephone or radio is understood more easily and is a psychological regression from the abstraction of printed language to the more elemental level of oral language. Finally, television is a medium which, contrary to the theories of McLuhan, conveys the most information in the most liberal form by giving us oral language combined with visual perception and requiring the least effort to interpret the abstractions. Thus television is a multichannel communication which is more elemental and therefore has greater immediacy and impact than other media.

This theory fully explains the aspects of broadcasting mentioned above. Broadcasting is popular and universal because it is elemental, is responsive to popular taste, and gives the audience a sense of contact with the world around it which is greater than that provided by any other medium.

Broadcasting is increasingly performing the journalistic function for the public not because it is superior by any abstract intellectual standards but because it is immediate, personal, and comprehensive. Television views of a scene may be and often are better than personal observation, in their ability to focus telescopically on details of interest, in their ability to move from place to place, and in their ability to select the scenes of action and interest. Television and radio duplicate and overlap each other to a great extent, but apparently television has the greater popularity because its multichannel communication with the audience conveys a sense of greater involvement and a closer apprehension of reality.

THE reflective-projective theory makes it easy to understand why people are so strongly attached to and upset by broadcasting and react so emotionally to it. It is because each projects his own ego into what he sees or hears and is frequently dissatisfied when he finds the picture unflattering. This reaction can easily be verified by a simple experiment. Take a picture of any individual with an ordinary camera

and then ask him, or her, whether the picture is altogether attractive and pleasing. Virtually no one, man or woman, is ever wholly pleased with a picture or reflection of himself. When it is possible to blame the photographer or someone else, that is the easiest course and therefore most frequently followed.

On the other hand, people are fascinated by pictures and are invariably more interested in pictures in which they appear than in pictures of others. The great increase in photography as a hobby in recent years is evidence of this phenomenon, and it is a commonplace in the photographic business that most pictures are pictures of people.

Another empirical verification is the relationship between people and mirrors. Almost no one can resist at least a glance into a mirror no matter how often and how recently he has inspected his own reflection. Thus the mirror theory of broadcasting explains not only the emotional involvement of the audience but also the popular appeal and universality of the medium.

The reflective-projective theory also explains the democratic paradox that in the field of mass communications the greater the appeal to the mass the more alienated the majority of intellectuals seems to become. Most of those who articulate the demand for democracy and service to the public interest, and who are accustomed to influence policy and social action in this manner, are of an intellectual elite. Such leaders think of democracy as a system in which they define the public interest and the public is persuaded to accept or acquiesce in leadership views. But in fact the public wants to see its own image in the mass media mirrors, not the image of intellectual leaders. Consequently when the public gets what it wants from the mass media this incurs the wrath of an intellectual elite and the slings and arrows of outraged critics who have been demanding service to the public but have been expecting their own rather than the public's views and tastes.

Finally, the reflective-projective theory is wholly consistent with the observation that broadcasting has become an

important component of contemporary culture. A nation or a community is not formed by lines on a map or even by geographical unity or natural boundaries, as we are learning anew each day. A nation or a community is formed by common interests, ideas, and culture—by a common image or vision of itself. But to have a common image or vision there must be one that is seen, understood, and accepted by all the people, not merely by a minority or by an elite. This requires that the social image reflected in the media mirrors be one that truly reflects the mass as the majority.

The common interest in entertainment, sports, news, and even advertising is likely to be more universally understood and effective in providing common ties of association and conversation than more esoteric and aesthetic material. It seems probable that a television showing of the World Series or of a popular western or other entertainment show will do more to promote a sense of national unity than a lecture on morality by some nationally known clergyman or a performance of Hamlet starring some great Shakespearean player. A family is not formed by recollections of a prettily posed, neatly dressed, tinted studio shot of the group on grandmother's birthday. A family is formed by shared experiences of skinned knees, trips to the doctor, hurried meals, mended pants, and all the million and one mundane commonplaces, hardships, and irritations of everyday living together. Perhaps the smudged, commonplace, homely, slightly unattractive picture that we get of ourselves from our mass media is providing us with a common image and a common cultural bond that we could not get from a more elegant and more attractive portrait.

In analyzing the role of mass media, or any other social phenomena, we must distinguish the judgments expressed in empirical and normative theories. Empirical theories are those which are purely descriptive and seek to explain and harmonize observed facts. Normative theories are those which set norms or standards and imply obligations to conform. Of course we need both. However, the first task is to understand before we undertake to judge. It is silly to condemn a

camel for having a hump and praise a horse for having a straight back, or condemn a horse for requiring frequent drinks of water and praise a camel for its ability to travel without water. These characteristics are simple facts of existence and are not rationally the basis for either praise or blame. These are things for which normative standards are irrelevant and the only reasonable course is to observe and understand. Once we observe and understand the nature of camels and horses we can then decide the use to which each is best put.

WHEN WE UNDERSTAND broadcasting it appears that the mission for which it is best fitted is the creation of a common contemporary culture and a sense of national (and perhaps international) unity. This also appears to be the function which now most needs to be performed. The creation of a common national culture embodying a spirit of national unity must surely rank as a foremost need of the present era. Of course, national unity does not require or imply unanimity of views on all issues or suppression of dissent. It does imply a common bond or mood as well as agreement on some basic ideas and principles. Indeed, national agreement on support of basic American constitutional principles is essential if dissent and its free expression are to survive.

On the other hand, the medium that provides the common denominator to promote national unity and community culture is not necessarily the one that can also provide general adult education, social reform, or even news and information, although these may be provided in some degree in the process of creating and disseminating a national culture. We should remember that Shakespeare in his day was a popular entertainer who wrote fanciful and escapist stories about royalty and nobility, about wars and violence, and not about the common people and ordinary experience.

Even among our mass media there are differences in the ability to perform the function of unification and common culture building. Magazines to an outstanding degree, and

even newspapers, are written and published for particular groups and classes of society. Evidence of this is proudly paraded by the publishers in their analyses of the income and educational status of readers. This can readily be observed by comparing such newspapers as *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal* with the *New York Daily News* and by comparing *The New Yorker* with *True Story Magazine*. Even more obvious stratification is evident in magazines which appeal to particular ethnic or religious groups as well as those with specific vocational and economic specialization.

In contrast, broadcasting is relatively universal in its appeal. By and large there is little catering to specific economic, ethnic, or cultural groups, and even where there is such specialization the programs of all stations are equally available to all members of the audience. One can hardly imagine an underprivileged slum dweller buying a copy of *Fortune*. However, the poor, the middle class, and the rich are about equally exposed to news of business and finance given on television news summaries or transmitted by the implicit message of popular entertainment.

If the reflective-projective theory of broadcasting is valid, the broadcasting media are not fixed in some immutable mold or rut from which they cannot emerge. On the contrary, as society itself is constantly changing so will the media change and the image of society which they reflect. Change is inevitable and eternal, and broadcasting will evolve and change with society.

IT APPEARS that much of the dissatisfaction that is voiced with broadcasting media is really an expression of basic dissatisfaction with society. To a large extent in past history the intellectual elite have lived in a separate world from the great mass of people and have neither confronted the mass or mass views and tastes nor sought to impose their own views and tastes upon the mass, except with respect to a few political issues. Broadcasting, as a universal medium, changes this. To the degree that the intellectual elite pay attention to

radio and television they inescapably confront mass tastes and desires. That this does not satisfy their own standards is not only to be expected but, indeed, is inherent in the very nature of things.

It is important to see broadcasting for what it is, and to use it for what it can best do and what will really be of greatest value to our society. Empirical inquiry and objective analysis indicate broadcasting is an electronic mirror that reflects an ambiguous image of society in which each member of the audience sees by projection his own vision of himself and society. To the degree that we are enabled to see a common reflection of society and induced to project a similar image of the relationship between the citizen and society, we build a common culture which will unite our country and, perhaps, eventually the world.

This is not only the function to which broadcasting is best adapted, but also the greatest contemporary challenge. What we urgently need today is a larger concept of community—to see the community of which we are part not merely as a town, city, metropolitan area, or state, but as a country, a unified, civilized, orderly national society.²¹ This is an image that cannot be created by art, but that must grow in the minds and hearts of men. We cannot say with certainty just what will nourish and what will poison its growth. Yet it does appear that the growth of a unified and cohesive national community will be promoted by the presentation of truly popular programs on mass media, especially broadcasting. The task of promoting national unity, social cohesion, and a larger concept of community is great enough and important enough to demand all the resources broadcasting can bring to it.

That is a task worthy of any medium. There need be no apology or lament for failure to do something else, if this much can be achieved. I do not see a reflection of a perfect nation or world in the ambiguous mirror of broadcasting, either now or in the foreseeable future, any more than I see a reflection of a perfect individual in any ordinary mirror no matter in what direction it is turned.

However, I do see a vision of an increasingly unified and integrated society in which men will more and more accept each other for what they are and strive for common social goals while permitting each individual to follow his own ideas and ideals whatever they may be. To help society evolve in this direction now appears to be both the natural function of broadcasting and the highest ideal toward which it can strive.

NOTES

1. Walter Sullivan, "Korea Finds 'Oldest' Printed Text," *The New York Times*, February 15, 1967, p. 39.

2. Remarks of Senator Warren G. Magnuson, August 30, 1967, "Coverage of the Recent Riots by the News Media," reported in *Broadcasting*, September 4, 1967, p. 72. Also see *Time*, August 25, 1967, p. 62, "Riot Coverage, Plus & Minus."

3. "So wonderful a potential, so miserable a reality" is given as the summary of "a reader survey" by the television critic of *The Christian Science Monitor*, August 18, 1967, p. 9. The views of the professional critics can be epitomized by a quotation from Bernie Harrison, television critic of the *Washington Star*: "I've been trying to find one critic who wrote something good, or even polite, about the new season of TV series. 'To describe it as a disaster,' the UPI's Rick DuBrow snapped, 'would be misleading, for a disaster implies that something of major import has occurred, and the whole point about the new series is that nothing has happened.' But so runs the mournful, predictable dirge, and it should be obvious that the quality TV series is now as extinct as that dead old dodo, anthology drama. . . . [E]ven the promise of variety to come can hardly make up for the distressingly routine character of the regular season." *Washington Star*, September 21, 1967, p. B 13.

4. Gary A. Steiner, *The People Look at Television* (1963), p. 411.

5. ITV 1966 (A Guide to Independent Television, published by ITA, 1966), p. 25.

6. Mitchell v. Charnley, *News by Radio* (1948), p. 5 *et seq.*

7. For a recent and very literate statement of the journalistic theory by a sophisticated and distinguished mind, see Raymond Swing, "Radio: The Languishing Giant," *Saturday Review*, August 12, 1967, p. 51.

8. Burns W. Roper, "Emerging Profiles of Television and Other Mass Media: Public Attitudes 1959-1967," a report by the president of Roper Research Associates on five national studies, April 5, 1967.

9. Carroll Broadcasting Co. v. FCC, 258 F2d 440, 17 RR 2066 (CA DC 1958). Also see Southwest Operating Co. v. FCC, 351 F2d 834 (CA DC 1965); James E. Meeks, "Economic Entry Controls in FCC Licensing: The Carroll Case Reappraised," 52 *Iowa L. Rev.* 236 (October 1966).

10. See Regulation of CATV Systems—Memorandum Opinion and Order on petition for reconsideration, 6 FCC2d 309, 330 (1967) (esp. dissenting opinion); Fetzer Cable Vision, *et al.*, 6 FCC2d 845, 857 (1967) (dissenting opinion).

11. Charles S. Steinberg, "The McLuhan Myth," *Television Quarterly* 6:7 (Summer 1967).

12. Marshall McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (1962), prologue in the first U.S.A. edition, and pp. 199, 209, 235.

13. Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (1964) (Signet ed. 1966), pp. 23, 24, 30, 35, 187, 274, ix.

14. William Stephenson, *The Play Theory of Mass Communication* (1967), pp. 45, 49, 91.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 205.

16. Roper, *op. cit.*, p. 7 *et seq.* Also see A. H. Raskin, "What's Wrong with American Newspapers?" *The New York Times Magazine*, June 11, 1967, p. 28; John Tebbel, "Britain's Chronic Press Crisis," *Saturday Review*, July 8, 1967, p. 49; Henry Raymont, "4 Chicago Newspapers Are Fighting Desperately to Regain Lost Readers," *The New York Times*, September 5, 1967, p. 38. Mr. Raskin says, *inter alia*: "There is disturbing skepticism among large groups of readers, including many of the best educated and most intellectually alive, about whether what they read in their newspapers is either true or relevant. . . . The equanimity with which many people took the recent strikes in New York, Detroit, Toledo and other major cities has made it plain that newspaper reading is a habit people can get out of." Mr. Tebbel concludes that: "The British press's problem has become the public's problem, and in the opinion of this displaced observer, it is America's dilemma as well, both in newspapers and in television." Mr. Raymont reports that since 1957 the Chicago daily newspapers have suffered a combined loss of circulation of 15 percent even though the metropolitan population has grown by about one million in the same period. *Newsweek* says: "Morning papers get the news, and suburban papers and television get the public." October 16, 1967, p. 92.

17. See Howard K. Smith, "Don't Expect Too Much from Public Television," *Washington Star*, October 1, 1967. Mr. Smith, an experienced broadcaster and social observer, says, "People who understand television but little, . . . are premature and hyperbolic in seeing a new age of wonders about to open. . . . Criticizing the fare on commercial TV is without doubt America's chief popular avocation. . . . But for an exercise Americans indulge in so much, it is odd how ill