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Strasbourg, 26 October 1973

COMMITTEE FOR OUT-OF-SCHOOL EDUCATION
AND CULTURAL DEVELOPMENT

Colloquy on
"Training in the Critical Reading of Television Language"
organised with the collaboration of
The Centre for Mass Communication Research
University of Leicester
(Leicester, 27-28 September 1973)

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SOME THESES AND REFLECTIONS ON COMMUNICATION

by

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The message I shall try to communicate in this paper can be briefly expressed in the form of two theses:

- 1) It is above all an individual's material conditions of life that determine to what extent and how the language of television (or for that matter any message of the mass media) will be understood. By "material conditions" I mean the physical environment, including other people, which forms the basis for an individual's immediate experience of the world around him, and for the social relations between him and other people. Accordingly, this thesis implies that it is not so much the language of a message or a medium which we should be concerned with, but primarily the socio-economic conditions of the audience.
- 2) The baseline for reasoning about communication policies in general and television programme policy in particular should be the relation of the messages transmitted to the objective state of affairs in the world. By objective state of affairs I mean the reality as discovered by scientific evidence, once more concerning primarily the material existence of the world regardless of what is the prevailing picture of that world in the public consciousness. Accordingly, this thesis - the previous one related with the comprehension of messages - emphasises the importance of materialistic considerations (materialism in the philosophical sense of the term) in mass communication policies and also communication research.

In the following I shall not go into detail in verifying these two theses. Instead I shall discuss the assumptions involved at a fairly general level in order to give some more elaborated background to the way of thinking I am representing. In fact, much of what follows may be familiar to you from my earlier writings concerning the so-called informational communication policy we tried to adopt and formulate in Finland during the past few years. It is my impression that this approach fits very well into the framework of "cultural democracy" set by the Council of Europe as the overall principle governing its activity in the field of culture, education and communication.

Now, let me start by noting how an individual acquires information about the world and creates for himself a personal view of the world. An individual certainly has a thirst for information and a strong desire to form a picture of the world. Man's basic nature would seem to be such that he must form for himself, in one way or another, an articulated image of the world in which he lives; this is the conclusion arrived at independently by both psychology and by communication research. The individual who does not have some sort of overall conception of the world revealed to him by his senses suffers from a sense of insecurity; his entire existence feels threatened.

The maintenance of a basic sense of security is one of man's most important biological needs, along with the need for food. It is thus

not a matter of indifference how strong and how detailed an overall view of the world the individual is able to establish for himself. The way in which the individual establishes such a world view for himself apparently differs fundamentally from, say, the way in which a jigsaw puzzle is assembled. Man's view of the world is not formed as a simple sum of various pieces of information, but is based on a more or less arbitrarily selected inner vision, a complex of belief and assumptions. This inner vision is naturally not created out of nothing; it is constructed out of the individual's experiences. But it is important to note that our view of the world is not a simple reflection of the information transmitted to us by our senses, but rather the result of a process of creative thinking, comparable to a work of art created by the imagination, describing the world around the individual.

Since this picture is created with the help of the imagination, it practically never corresponds to reality. In particular when the individual comes into contact with a new environment, experiences new things and encounters new people, the world view based on his previous experience easily comes into conflict with the new information transmitted by his senses. The world around us is unavoidably in a constant state of flux, tending towards increasing plurality, even if we ourselves are standing still.

In such circumstances, the individual must either reject the new information or form for himself a new world view, one better adapted to the new information coming in. The continued rejection of new information over a longer span of time, however, leads to increased insecurity, since the individual still senses that the world is not quite the way he imagines it; for this reason, the latter alternative, that of establishing a new world view, is more common. We are thus faced with a continuous irresolvable conflict; on one hand we have a need for a clear-cut and unshakeable world image, while on the other we are unable to reject the new information which is constantly impinging on us from outside.

In this connection it is useful to schematically divide human psychology into two levels: first, thoughts controlled by the individual himself, and second, externally-controlled conditioned learning. The former is a prerequisite for language learning, for example, and also for a capacity for critical evaluation, while the latter corresponds to manipulation, i.e. the individual being directed without himself being able to make decisions. We may now say that what happens as new information penetrates into the world view of an individual is critical cognition: it is like an earthquake establishing re-evaluation, in other words intellectual activation. On the other hand, hardly any spontaneous and autonomous cognition takes place through externally-directed manipulative thinking; the individual only follows the thoughts offered him. Of course, what happens in practice is both spontaneous and conditioned learning simultaneously. (This dualistic distinction - as well as others to follow - is only meant as a vehicle for theoretical discussion and not necessarily as a description of empirical reality.)

The media which function as extensions of the senses are naturally very efficient as transmitters of new experiences; they provide the

informational building blocks for rational decision-making. In serving this function, the media operate at the same time as enemies of the already established world view. But the media need not be used for the transmission of new information; they can naturally also be used for the repetition of already familiar things, thus reinforcing the old world view and strengthening people's sense of security. In this case, we use the extensions of our senses for the purpose of re-learning an already familiar environment, a review and repetition of earlier experience; the media reflect, as it were, the past.

Here we are speaking of the functions and uses of the media from the point of view of a recipient - and not yet from the point of view of an overall policy of the media institutions. Let us still continue for a while at this individualistic level and consider what has been written about the problems of passivity and alienation of the audiences of mass media (not least television).

This is what my colleague, Dr. Veikko Pietola, writes:

"Not many read a newspaper to find out what has really happened, or organize and control their view of the world on the basis of this information; more often it is right to feel that they belong to something, whether this be a restricted environment or the whole world. This need for contact is very close to the concept of alienation. Without doubt those who in one way or another feel themselves isolated from their social environment and whose normal contacts are weak or unsatisfactory often seek a substitute for these in the mass media ...

"Alienation also includes the feeling that the world cannot be controlled. This uncertainty can be resolved by withdrawing from the sphere of information which demonstrates this state of affairs to him, i.e. by avoiding the mass media either completely or at least in respect of information which would reinforce this state. But there are also alienated individuals who use the mass media even more than average; for them the content of the news is indifferent, what matters is a fixed point in life. These alienated and high news-consuming individuals were the most disturbed during TV and newspaper strikes."

Another Finnish author, Mr. Pekka Peltola, has this to report after an extensive tour of participant observation among the general public:

"It turned out that, although people followed news broadcasts with concentration, interest and confidence in the reliability of the message, most of them did not even understand the content of news items which concerned themselves directly. Thus for example a widow who listened to a programme concerning the family pension did not understand what she had heard; she did not even realise that the new law meant an addition of almost 200 marks to her own monthly income in the immediate future. In talking about the matter, she said that she often asked or heard

about such things from a certain neighbour. While the respondents generally had fairly vague ideas concerning general problems, there was one thing about which a clear and consistent answer was given: 'the ordinary man has nothing to say about what the high-ups in Helsinki decide in matters concerning us all'. The worst of it is that they seem to have been right.

"This alienation from matters of general concern was so extreme that the interviewer had to give up using the term 'participation', since it was unfamiliar to the people in this sense. It turned out that the lack of interest in or comprehension of programmes of general importance was due to precisely this factor. People were not interested in questions in which they felt they had no say, even if the issues concerned themselves quite directly."

What is central to the problem of alienation is thus not the relationship between the broadcasting institution and the audience, but that between the audience and the society. The core of the matter lies in the isolation of the individual, unable to influence what happens to him, overpowered by a sense of helplessness and uncertainty. A great deal has been written (from Marx to Fromm) about this typical scourge of the industrialized welfare state, and about its causes. The situation will evidently improve only when the private individual feels that he has the power to influence the decisions which affect him - an argument frequently repeated in recent discussion concerning the democratisation of society. Thus the mass media should also offer a wide-ranging and factually-based view of the world, and provide information concerning the channels available to the individual citizen for participating in the decisions which concern him.

The media can go in one of two directions with regard to the problem of alienation. They can either give momentary relief to the symptoms of alienation by repeating familiar and entertaining material. Or they may offer man the means of conquering his state of alienation by providing facts about society and about ways of participating in the political process.

We must point out that neither one of these basic alternatives creates alienation, since this occurs in society regardless of the activity of the mass media. On the other hand, it is evident that the former policy, that of lulling the audience into a feeling of security, will not in fact reduce alienation, but rather will tend to increase it; while the second alternative, that of 'the painful truth', at least offers the preconditions for a 'healing' of alienation. At the same time, this kind of informational programme policy makes visible the alienation prevailing in society; people, as it were, awoken to a perception of their own state, and with the help of the information they receive they are able to chart their position in society. The programme policy of the familiar refrain, on the other hand, keeps the problem of alienation out of sight, and diffuses the image of an unreal idyll over society.

With the theme of alienation we have already been brought from looking at an individual as a receiver of information to broader

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societal perspectives with relation to communication policies. Let us continue in the same terrain between a micro and a macro approach - and this time the concept of public opinion is our point of departure.

In studying public opinion on social and political issues of general interest - such as attitudes toward national defence or the Common Market - it has been found such public opinion is not by any means based on the independent thinking of private individuals. What is called the public opinion prevailing among people is frequently a relatively autonomous phenomenon, unrelated to independent intellectual activity on the part of individual members of the society; it directs the ideas of individuals rather than being directed by them. We may speak of a 'climate of opinion', which affects the individual from outside and tempts him to take a particular attitude without the trouble of independent thinking which would lead to an autonomous decision. This climate of opinion feeds people ready-made opinions from outside, as is sometimes said of traditional educational methods, instead of allowing them to form their own independent opinions in peace.

What then is this 'independent formation of opinions'? Do we not in any case assimilate our ideas 'from outside', gradually learning from what we see and hear around us? This is undoubtedly the case; man is inextricably bound to his environment, and this holds true for his intellectual processes as well. But this does not mean that man is nothing more than a learning machine, whose mental processes contain exclusively what has been put into them and nothing more. The latest psychological research emphasizes precisely the originality, spontaneity and active nature of man's thinking; the way in which language is acquired by the child, for example, has been shown probably to be more an act of creative mental activity than one of passive memorization. Man seems to be built in such a way that he has a powerful tendency toward this kind of 'autonomous thinking', 'mental play', 'intellectual curiosity', 'idea development', etc. Although the point of departure for mental activity thus comes from outside the individual he is still to a certain extent free to think independently - i.e. to form his own opinions.

But opinions cannot be formed out of nothing, no matter how independent the individual's thinking. What is needed is information concerning the issue in question; the final result naturally depends to a crucial extent on the material available. Here we come to the core of the manner in which public opinion is manipulated; the prevailing climate of opinion blocks the path of information before it reaches people's minds - it forms, as it were, a protective wall around the individual which repels new information.

The climate of thought protects old attitudes and already assimilated opinions against new information and against the revision of opinions. The climate of opinion does not favour an unbiased mind and thorough-going factual information, but rather superficial gestures, worn-out clichés and rumours moving on the wind. In functioning as a protective wall and supporting the individual's prejudices, the climate of opinion fills him with a sense of security, an illusory certainty, which is threatened by everything new and unpredictable.

The individual who breathes the air saturated by the prevailing climate of opinion usually has extremely scanty informational resources

for the formation of an independent opinion; he has no range of choice. What is available is chiefly one kind of raw material for autonomous thinking: the opinions previously adopted by others, and the information which supports these opinions. This is particularly the case with those people who live in remote areas or who, because of lack of means, are not likely to obtain many-sided information or experience. Such an individual is to a great extent at the mercy of the prevailing climate of opinion and is easily manipulated by it.

This conclusion is frequently rebutted by the claim that it means belittlement of people's ability of judgement. This of course is not the case; the "people's judgement" is on the contrary emphasized here by pointing to the originality of man's thinking. The basic issue is that of the prerequisites or raw material which is made available for the general public - in other words the informational point of departure. It is hypocritical to dismiss the question of manipulation of people's opinions by a simple reference to the "people's power of discrimination", unless it can be shown that the people have an opportunity to use this power.

What we have found concerning the foundations of opinion formation among the population indicates incontrovertibly that it is only a privileged minority which has the opportunity to utilize its power of judgement to the full extent. This is the case not only in Finland, but in all so-called industrialized and civilized nations. It is simply untrue to claim that we live in an enlightened democracy, in which the citizens form their opinions freely on the basis of many-sided information. A more realistic, perhaps slightly exaggerated picture is that of a society in which the manipulated majority thinks in the way desired by a powerful minority.

So far we have spoken of the climate of opinion as though it were a kind of pollution of the air, amidst which people live without particularly noticing it. But where does this pollution come from - what is the source of the climate of opinion? The individual man or woman is reached by the climate of opinion through other people and through the mass media; he hears what 'people talk about', he reads what 'the papers say', and he follows what 'they say on the radio and TV'. This stream of ideas which reaches the individual, however, has not arisen out of nothingness; 'people's talk' does not originate in their minds, and what is said or written in the mass media comes from some other source than the editorial or production offices of the media themselves.

What, then, is this real source behind all the talk? One of these sources at least is clear: the school and childrearing principles. During his first twenty years, the individual has undergone a very thorough process of socialization at home, in the school and in his peer group, and the way in which this has taken place will decisively affect his future thinking - what he says to others or writes in the paper. The educational system which underlies the climate of opinion further includes the church and organizational activity, from temperance societies to political associations. In brief, the climate of opinion reflects those permanent institutions which are most prominent in the society.

Of the institutions in our society, the most stable is naturally our system of social organization itself. In the final analysis, in

fact, we can say that the climate of opinion is based on the social and economic system; it is a protective wall erected around the members of society by the prevailing social order. This is the case at least in our own society, in which the institutions controlling society are usually outside political democracy.

The real roots of the climate of opinion thus run very deep. It is therefore wrong to exaggerate the part played by the press, radio and television in creating climate. In general, the mass media do not create the individual's values and attitudes; these are determined as part of the climate of opinion prevailing in the society, in the course of everyday life, particularly in the process of earning a living, in school and at work, by the rewards and punishments encountered by the individual.

On the other hand, it is also wrong to belittle the significance of the media; while they usually are not the original source of the climate of opinion, they play an important role as snappers of the prevailing climate of opinion at any given moment. The press and the electronic media are an inseparable part of the climate of opinion, and they also have a crucial effect on the tone and emphasis of the climate of opinion at any given time.

It should be noted here that in the long run indirect control is often more effective than direct interference. Recent media research has in fact begun to emphasize the long-term influence of the press, radio and television on the audience; not the momentary effect of individual articles or programmes, but the influence on opinion formation of a steady and prolonged stream of information. Writers in the field have begun to talk about indoctrination, about the gradual manipulation of ways of thinking. At the same time, increased attention is being paid to the question of who determines the content of the newspaper or broadcast in the offices where these are prepared. Power relations in communication are the new subject of discussion.

What then would be the situation if all our mass media, the press, radio and television accurately reflected the opinions found among the members of the society? This would certainly be closer to a healthy pluralism; manipulation of the individual through the medium of climate of opinion would be reduced, and the possibilities of independent opinion formation increased.

But let us note that to mirror the opinions found in society, no matter how impartially this is done, is not the only function which may be assumed by the mass media. They may take on the task of transmitting not only already existing opinions, but new information to serve as the foundation for continuous opinion formation as well. In other words, the media may take up a position in opposition to the prevailing climate of opinion, by constantly introducing new raw material and thus supporting changes in ways of thinking rather than their conservation. A press which concentrated on the transmission of new information would in a way be biased in favour of change, while a press which concentrates on mirroring the prevailing climate of opinion is biased in favour of the status quo.

The function of the western mass media is traditionally defined as both the reflection of prevailing opinions and the transmission of new

information, with the latter - the transmission of news - usually given priority. It now seems, however, that in practice the mirroring of opinions - more specifically, the transmission of opinions pleasing to those in power - has come to occupy first place, often without conscious realization by the practitioners. This is the conclusion which has been arrived at after an analysis of the way in which the press, radio and television treat news material in a certain light, and in general after examining the world view offered by the mass media from the point of view of indoctrination.

We might ask would it not be right to change this order of importance and to lay greater practical stress on the significance of new information. The fundamental question of communication policy is in fact precisely this: to which do we want to give priority, the reinforcement of prevailing ways of thinking and strengthening of man's momentary sense of security, or the transmission of new information which will inevitably disturb the old view of the world? The latter alternative may lead to temporary increase in insecurity, but on the other hand the new world view, based on more comprehensive information, is better equipped to receive and assimilate further information about the world.

This question cannot be settled by appealing to the audience concerned, since people attach importance both to entertainment which reinforces the feeling of security, and to new information which gnaws away at the old world view. The right decision, in fact, is not to be found in the needs of the individual but in those of the whole society; we must think of what is best for the entire community formed by the media audience.

The so-called informational programme policy adopted in recent years in Finnish broadcasting policy, which defines the transmission of new information as the primary function of radio and television, is based on the assumption that for democracy to function people must have information; information about the society and political activity carried on by their elected representatives. If such information is not available, the individual will become alienated from reality, and cease to develop; he will come to a standstill in the midst of a changing world. And what is most important, in the absence of information man is incapable of independent decision; he can be led at anybody's will, without even being aware of it.

Reframing my second thesis in the beginning of this paper, what is crucial in the principles of informational communication policy is the goal of using the mass media for transmitting information about concrete reality, i.e. accumulating concrete evidence on the objective world in the consciousness of a recipient.

In this connection one should note that it is not simply a maximal pluralism of the messages transmitted which is implied by the informational approach. If pluralism were considered to be the final principle determining the selection of messages for a mass medium we would face an extreme relativism of values. Here our approach certainly differs from the positivistic theory of values. We start from the fact that some values are true while some others are false. No subjectivism or relativism can be defended with respect to the values, either. We must admit that - even in matters of social and human values - all

points of view and all pieces of information are not simply equally true: some more than others conform with reality. The informational principles of selection of messages for mass communication are derived from the concern for the truthful reflection of objective reality, not from the liberalistic concern for the 'balance' of all kinds of social interests - justified and non-justified. A trivial example: to report in the name of pluralism that the globe may be round or flat would be a simple lie. Similarly a journalist or a TV producer who gives equal attention to propositions defending poverty mechanisms in society as to propositions attacking them may be pluralistic but is also a plain fool. On the other hand, we do not deny the obligation of transmitting information on all the members of social contradictions; this is one of the necessary conditions of maximal information on social issues.

Finally, after all this philosophical reasoning and setting of alternative policies, reference must be made to the pragmatic realities concerning possibilities to change anything. While looking for new directions we should keep in mind that mass communication media are not isolated institutions for the distribution of information, culture and entertainment, but are vital organs of the social body, in which the deepest blood vessels and nervous pathways traverse the politico-economic tissue. Hence, it is not sufficient to look at what happens within the media and try to change their policies, since most of the determining forces operate from outside, through institutional structures.

However, the mass media should not be viewed as 100 per cent predetermined, either. There is always a marginal scope of freedom to change the practices within the media. The author of this paper does not deny that something may be done to increase democracy in the media and through the media - and we ought to work constantly to this aim. But I do claim that those who want to limit their devotion in changing the world only within the media are biased in their analysis and policy.