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Psychology, psychiatry and mental illness in the mass media: A study of trends, 1900-1959

The "psychological trend" in mass communications and popular culture has been the subject of much stimulating discussion but little objective study. As part of our research on communications problems in the area of popular conceptions of mental health, we gathered information about certain aspects of the currents of attention devoted to psychological and mental illness topics in the mass media.

Our search for centralized sources of information about media content led to standard reference guides as indicators of the availability of printed material under relevant headings over periods of time. But who indexes movies and television programs? The answer we found is: the censors. Censorship is conducive to a centralized record keeping and classifying not found anywhere else in the industry. With information collected from these sources we were able to trace the ebb and flow of attention devoted to mental illness topics and the mental health professions in popular magazines over the last half century, in the *New York Times* since 1913, in feature movies since 1944 and on television since 1954.

Since our vantage point is primarily that of communications research, we shall not attempt—but wish to invite—interpretation of our findings in terms of the history of the mental health movement or of the professions concerned. We shall limit ourselves to reporting the findings and shall conclude with a few suggestions pertinent to mass communications theory and public information strategy.

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POPULAR MAGAZINES

The *Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature* was examined for policy, format, typography and general consistency of indexing over the years. Preliminary calculations indicated that the few changes that did take place had no substantial effect on the relative proportions of articles indexed under any one topic. Multiple listings of articles appeared negligible. Changes in subject headings did, of course, complicate the task of tabulation, but tracing these changes yielded clues to changing emphases.

We shall anticipate the next section by noting that the same procedure was followed with respect to the *New York Times Index* from which we derived our estimate of trends in the *Times'* coverage of our subjects. The general stability of indexing policies and the apparent consistency of our findings across the media suggest that, within their proper limits and with certain cautions, these reference tools can be used for the assessment of trends in the availability of materials on selected topics.

The *Reader's Guide,* of course, does not index all popular magazines, and the *New York Times Index* covers but a single newspaper. But the 100-odd magazines indexed in the *Reader's Guide* for over half a century include most of the major magazines libraries consider to be of lasting value. Listings also mean, therefore, availability in libraries across the country. Similarly, the *New York Times Index* opens channels of information beyond the actual coverage of the *Times.* It also provides us with a comparison of magazine and press policies in regard to our subjects.

The subject headings examined in each volume of the two indexes were those we thought to be most directly relevant to mental illness, psychiatry and psychology. Our criteria of relevance had to be arbitrary. We included headings such as *amnesia* and *hypnotism* because of the role of these subjects in popular fiction and drama. We excluded *child study* and its predecessors because it led us too far afield. The final list may be subjected to criticism for a number of reasons, but it appeared adequate for our purposes. Also, preliminary computations indicated that the addition or substitution of closely related subjects would not have materially altered our general results.

SUBJECT HEADINGS IN THE READER'S GUIDE

The geneology of subject headings presents a study in shifting concepts and evolution of terms.

Subject headings in periodical reference guides are not easily changed. Many librarians rely on these guides for their own indexing procedures, and a change in headings involves costly revision of files. Subject heading in the H. W. Wilson periodical indexes reflect: (a) common usage of terms, (b) professional usage in the specialized fields, and (c) the editors' striving for consistency and permanence amidst the semantic flux of our times. Asked about her policy in regard to outmoded headings, the editor of the *Reader's Guide* once commented: "When I shudder at them and can't stand them any longer, I finally change them." [1]

Only six of the complete list of 43 headings appeared in the first (1900–1904) bound volume of the *Reader's Guide.* They were: *Insanity, Insane Hospitals, Idiocy, Defective Children, Hypnotism* and *Psychology.*

[1] Lawler, John, *The H. W. Wilson Company; Half a Century of Bibliographic Publishing* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1950), p. 106. See Chapter VII for a more detailed discussion of indexing policies.

The number of headings more than tripled by 1910. *Mental Hygiene* and *Mental Disease* (the latter changed to *Mental Illness* in 1955) joined *Insanity* to furnish a substantial amount of listings through the years. *Defective Children* merged into *Defective Classes,* then *Defectives,* which, together with *Feeble-Minded,* became *Mentally Handicapped* in 1957. *Abnormal Children* and *Backward Children* split off from *Defective Classes. Insanity* and *Crime* was initiated, and *Amnesia* began as a separate heading.

Mental Healing began as a major heading (to be changed to *Psychotherapy* in 1941), and *Psychoanalysis* was initiated. "Psychological" specialization began: *Pathological, Physiological,* and *Educational* subheadings were soon joined by *Research* and *Experimental. Psychologist* originated in 1910, and *Psychological Examination* in 1915.

The end of World War I found *Psychological* (later *Psychiatric*) *Clinics* and *Industrial Psychology* added to the list. The late twenties contributed *Neurosis, Mongolism, Psychopathic Wards,* and *Psychiatry* itself. The last, started in 1929, subsumed most of the listings previously under *Psychology, Pathological.*

The only new headings started in the thirties were *Exceptional Children* (later to absorb *Abnormal Children*) and *Insane* (later *Mentally Ill*) *Care and Treatment.* World War II added *Psychological Warfare,* and *Psychiatry-Military.* Its aftermath might have been reflected in the addition of *Therapy* to *Mental Disease* (later *Mental Illness*), of *Psychiatric Employees* to *Insane* (now *Psychiatric*) *Hospitals,* and in the initiation of *Psychiatrist, Child Psychiatry,* and *Psychoanalysis and Religion.*

Changes in terminology (such as *Mental Illness* for *Mental Disease* and *Insanity, Mentally Handicapped* for *Feeble-minded* and *Defectives*) marked the indexing trends of the 1950's, along with new subheadings on *Diagnosis, Therapy, Rehabilitation,* and *Social Aspects,* under *Mental Illness.*

General trends

There is little point in proving that the total number of articles written on mental illness, psychiatry, psychology (and many other subjects) increased in the last half century. The more significant question is how the number of such articles changed, if at all, in relation to all other topics magazines write about.

The *Reader's Guide* already provides a "sampling" of periodical literature; any subsection of its listings is weighted to some extent by the limitations imposed on the whole. But there is still the possibility that changes in the number of articles listed under selected headings reflect changes in these overall limitations—such as the number of periodicals indexed or the total size of a volume—rather than real changes in relative proportions.

We accounted for these possibilities by computing trends three ways. First, we obtained simple yearly averages (number of articles listed in bound volume divided by the number of years covered). Next, we divided this by the number of periodicals indexed in each volume. Third, we divided the yearly averages by the number of pages contained in each volume.

The yearly averages show an overall climb in the total number of articles indexed under our selected headings, with the last three volumes containing about three times as many relevant articles as the first three volumes, and the sharpest decline occurring in the early thirties.

When the number of articles is weighted by the number of periodicals indexed, which, incidentally, has been quite stable, we find a similar curve. The rise from the first to the last three volumes was only two

and one-third, but there were no reversals in trend when the number of periodicals indexed was taken into account.

Weighting by the number of pages contained in each volume of the *Reader's Guide* changed the overall upward trend; it appears that popular magazine articles on mental illness, psychology, psychiatry and related subjects did *not* increase in number in relation to articles on all other subjects listed in the *Reader's Guide* in the last 59 years.

The year-to-year trends, however, are the same, regardless of the way they are computed. For example there is a striking similarity between our graphs and the economic trends of the nation. Popular interest in (or exposure to) articles on mental illness, psychiatry and psychology appears to rise in war and prosperity and fall during depression or recession.[2]

THE NEW YORK TIMES

Our historical survey of press coverage was limited to stories published in the *New York Times* and listed in the *New York Times Index,* published since 1913, under headings identical or similar to those studied in the *Reader's Guide.* The method of measurement was in standard pages and fractions of pages of the *Index* occupied by story listings under these headings.[3]

An examination of trends in coverage in the *New York Times* and of the frequency of magazine articles weighted by the number of periodicals indexed in the *Reader's Guide* shows that the ups and downs were earlier and more violent in the newspaper, as we might expect, especially in comparison with a composite index of many magazines with different editorial policies and publication dates.

The high peak around 1925 reflected a rash of legal, institutional and crime stories about insanity, an apparent preoccupation with "religious manias" and with the supposed (harmful) effects of prohibition on mental illness. The similar highpoint in 1948 was the result of news about postwar international developments, about stepped-up legislative and organizational activities and of the growing impact of studies of the causes of Army draft rejections. The news values of these subjects apparently surpassed their usefulness as materials for magazine articles; the magazine trend shows relatively slight humps for these two periods.

MOVIES

The Production Code Administration of the Motion Picture Association of America, Inc., places its Seal of Approval on about 95 per cent of all commercial movies exhibited in the United States. In the course of its review, the PCA also classifies each film by "type," "significant story elements" and other categories.

One category of film "types" is "psychological." While less than four out of every hundred feature films fell into the category of "psychological" in the period from 1944–1954, the output of "psychological" movies ranged from 28 in 1947 to none in 1954.

Another, less exclusive, classification is one which notes "significant story elements"

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[2] The magazines which accounted for 64 per cent of all listings for the entire period were, in order of frequency of articles: *Science News Letter, Science Digest, Time, Newsweek, Reader's Digest, Today's Health, Life, Coronet, New York Times Magazine, The Saturday Review, Scientific American and the Saturday Evening Post.*

[3] The "standard page" was the 1950–1958 average of 2,403 words per page. This method was used to eliminate the effects of type and format changes in the bound volumes.

in each film. A yearly count of these from 1950 through 1958 shows that nearly one in ten films contained significant "psychological" story elements in the opinion of the PCA coder. The "psychological" elements rose to a high of 18.4 per cent of all films released in 1951, fell to a low of 2.3 per cent in 1954, and rose again in 1957.

A check on the types of films most likely to include significant "psychological" story elements showed murder mystery leading with 40 per cent of such films (but only 17 per cent of all films). Science fiction and horror films accounted for 11 per cent of those involving "psychological" story elements (but only 4 per cent of all films).

TELEVISION

Our estimate of trends in the portrayal of mental illness and mental health professionals on television came from the files of a network censor. It is limited to filmed programs, both old movies and filmed TV shows selected from a clearance file which contains a record of all films screened for telecast over the network. This record includes a brief synopsis of each program and of censorship action taken, if any. Thus, we could tabulate the incidence of filmed programs containing relevant themes or portrayals significant enough to be noted in the synopses.

Beginning in appreciable numbers in 1954, the frequency of relevant material screened for network telecast came to a peak in 1957, then declined.

A check on the censor's own classification of relevant programs revealed that mental illness themes and portrayals were most likely to occur in TV "drama" (54 per cent) and mystery (28 per cent) and in feature movie mystery (47 per cent) and "drama" (20 per cent).

CONCLUSIONS

Despite obvious differences (attributable to certain characteristics and business conditions unique to each medium) there are broad similarities among the mass media in the amount of attention devoted to our topics.

These similarities appear to be anchored in basic productive developments of society. The psyche seems to receive a greater share of attention when Johnny goes marching off, or moves to the suburbs, or buys a new car, than when he might be concerned about a job, or the rent, or the monthly payments. Virtually every lowpoint in relevant output marks a depression or recession; this is true also when relevant material is measured as percentage of total output.

Trends in news and other nonfiction are not independent from currents in popular fiction and drama. Information and education might not be so far removed from what we call entertainment and escape as it is commonly supposed. It may be that we do not really "escape" the concerns that loom large in the "reality material" of news and nonfiction when we turn to entertainment but only transform them into conventionally stylized fictional and dramatic forms.

Any attempt to communicate ideas or change attitudes about mental illness and the mental health professions calls for a broad concern with the full cultural context in which messages and images are perceived. Limiting the concern to tactics of message-manipulation or to strategies of presenting information alone are likely to be inadequate to the task.

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