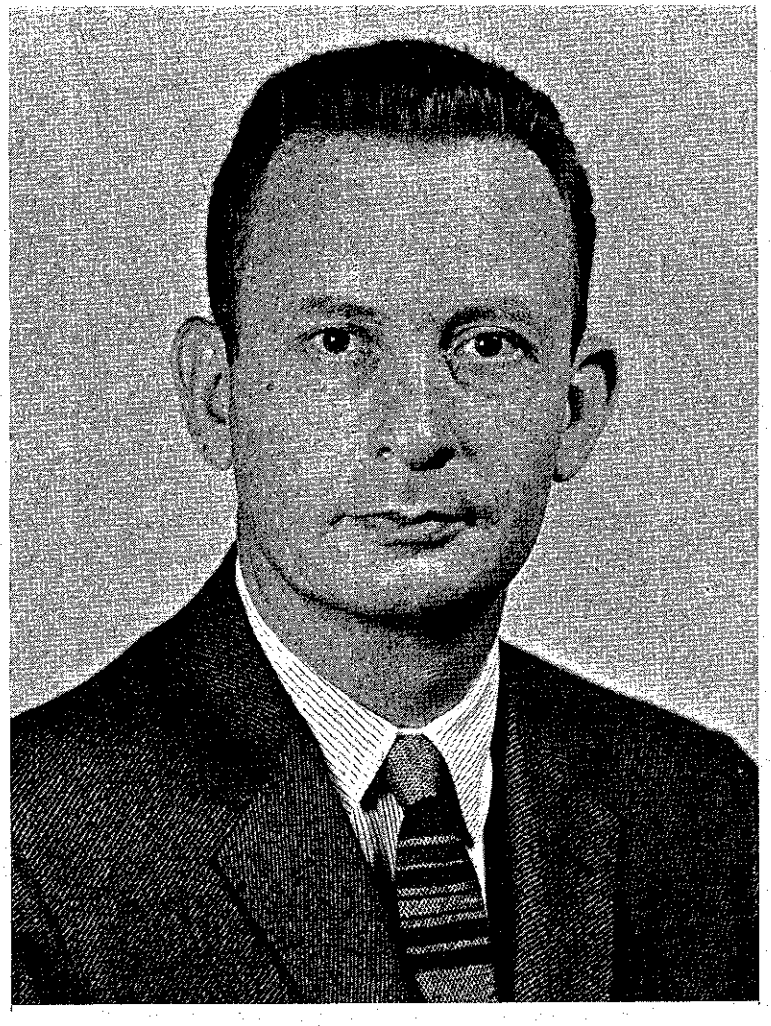

Mass Media and the Crisis in Education

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It has never been wise to assume that the needs of education determine what goes on in the schools. "Ideas for educational innovation, which are being discussed today with high excitement among educators and the public, have actually been in the educational literature for many decades."[1] Studies of innovation in education indicate that neither demonstrations of need nor findings of research are, by themselves, sufficient causes for change. And the Brickell report on *Organizing New York State for Educational Change* revealed that the rate of instructional innovation more than doubled within 15 months after the firing of the Soviet Sputnik I on October 4, 1957.

It would be hasty to conclude that Moscow alone pulls the trigger of educational change in the United States, or that demonstration of needs and research on alternatives are wholly without effect. The causes of change are complex. Change occurs against a background of the allocation of attention, values, and resources. It is a man-made process. Even crises are *made*, and the shock of Sputnik was no exception. Nor was it accidental that its implications affected education rather than, say, the way industry is organized. The facts of Soviet

[1]Jean Dresden Grambs, *Schools, Scholars, and Society* (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1965), p. 8.

scientific and technical development were available long before Sputnik, but it took a dramatic demonstration to make our media of communications direct public attention to them. And it was inherent in the industrial structure of our mass media that the finger of indignation should point away from, rather than toward, themselves and their clients.

A by-product of these institutional pressures was a belated, and perhaps only fleeting, recognition of the depth and magnitude of a crisis still in the making. The crisis relates both to education and to the technological imperatives of our age, but it is rooted in the system by which we allocate attention, values, and resources.

That system, as almost everything around us, is a product of the industrial revolution. The industrial revolution, and its extension into the field of communications and culture, transformed the physical, social and symbolic environments and requirements through which members of the species Homo Sapiens become some sort of human creatures.

A conference on technology and education is a timely opportunity to explore some facets of this transformation. My purpose is to sketch the relationship between the two cultural offsprings of this technological transformation and to trace the allocation of attention, values, and resources devoted to education. In attempting my task, I will be talking about how our society educates its citizens about education. This is a process conducted largely through the mass media, and it underlies the allocation decisions which ultimately determine whether the schools can meet the imperatives for investment in skill, responsibility, and enlightenment demanded of a viable civilization in a technological age.

When we discuss amounts and trends in public attention the mass media direct to the formal educational enterprise, we are dealing with the way one cultural institution relates to and represents another. This is a complex and delicate relationship. It is the product of the historical development and of the institutional structures and vantage points of the two institutions.

Both institutions of public acculturation are offsprings of the industrial transformation. Public education, or formal schooling for all, was born out of the struggle for equality of opportunity (which is far from over), and is sustained by the demand for literacy, competence, and coherence in increasingly mobile, de-tribalized, de-traditionalized, and non-deferential industrial societies. Universal public education is feasible, of course, only when the availability of non-human energy makes it possible (as well as necessary) to invest human resources in their own further development.

The other major new branch of institutionalized public acculturation is the system of mass communication. Mass communication becomes possible when technological means are available and social organizations emerge for the mass production and distribution of message systems.

The mass media system is, then, the direct descendent of technology, mass production, mass markets, and corporate or collective organization. It is the cultural arm of the industrial order, well-suited to its need for rapid, continuous, centralized, and standardized reproduction and distribution of cultural commodities to mass audiences. The revolutionary aspect of this technological-mediated communication system is its ability to mass produce and distribute messages beyond previous limitations of handicraft production and face-to-face interaction, and thus to form historically new bases for collective thought and action. Mass media use this "public-making" ability to pursue institutional goals of their own and of their clients, and to measure their own performance at least in terms of circulation, audience type, ratings, etc. Mass media are in business to produce and sell publics; their historic significance lies in their ability to allocate and channel public attention.

Constitutional commission and omission enabled both media and education to escape centralized public development and control. But, although partly exempt from the laws of the Republic, the mass media were subject to the laws of industrial organization and development from which they sprang. These "laws" required mechanization, concentration, and control – if not public, then private – and made mass media the cultural arms of the industrial order.

By comparison, public schools remain the last major folk institution of advanced industrial society. Schools are not easily mechanized, centralized, or even organized. Technological developments in instruction may release personal interaction for the less routine and more uniquely judgmental tasks of learning, but education requires individual attention at its most critical points, and thus large amounts of human investment. This makes it relatively expensive. But the amount of necessary or desirable expense – or investment – is not easily determined, because there is no convenient yardstick for measuring the product. A complex system of pressures and allocations of competing and often conflicting attentions and values determines how much of our resources will be invested.

Results of a Recent Study

In the following I would like to report some fragments of a study I have recently concluded on this subject.[2] First I will compare the proportion of gross national product and the proportion of mass media content devoted to education. Then I will sketch some trends within these overall amounts. Finally I will attempt to place these trends and relationships in some historical perspective. My thesis is not only that our allocation of values bears some critical scrutiny but also that our system of education about education has obscured the scope and depth of its underdevelopment.

The rate at which a proportion of gross national product is invested in education may be a basic index of knowledge development. Some contend that this rate is also related to the *growth* of GNP. At any rate, both the rate of increase in gross national product, and the percentage of GNP spent for all types of formal education in the U.S. fluctuated between 3 and 5 percent in the decade 1950 to 1960.

The proportion of mass media attention devoted to education bears some similarity to these figures. A fifty-year average of 2.5 percent of all privately published books (excluding textbooks) dealt with education; the 1960 figure was 3.0 percent. Various measures indicate an average of 4.0 percent of news content devoted to education news, schools, and teachers. Mass circulation popular magazines devoted about 2.0 percent of their non-advertising space and 3-4 percent of all articles to articles about education and teachers.

So much for the general magnitudes involved both in the allocation of resources and of mass media attention directed to the educational enterprise. Now let us look at *trends* in this allocation.

A few graphs will serve to establish general tendencies of mass media attention in the last 50 years. First, books about education, which, as we have noted, averaged 2.5 percent of all privately published titles (excluding textbooks). Figure 1 shows trends over a 50-year period in comparison with similar data from Great Britain. The actual number of titles published in England is higher than in the U.S., and the percentage of British books about education averages three times the U.S. percentage. But our concern here is with trends, and the graph does not show the differences in magnitude.

The trends are quite similar. From 1910 to 1960 (the last date for which comparable figures were available) the number of books about education, and their percentage share of all titles, declined. The deep-

[2]George Gerbner, "Mass Communications and Popular Conceptions of Education: A Cross-Cultural Study." U. S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, Cooperative Research Project No. 876, 1964.

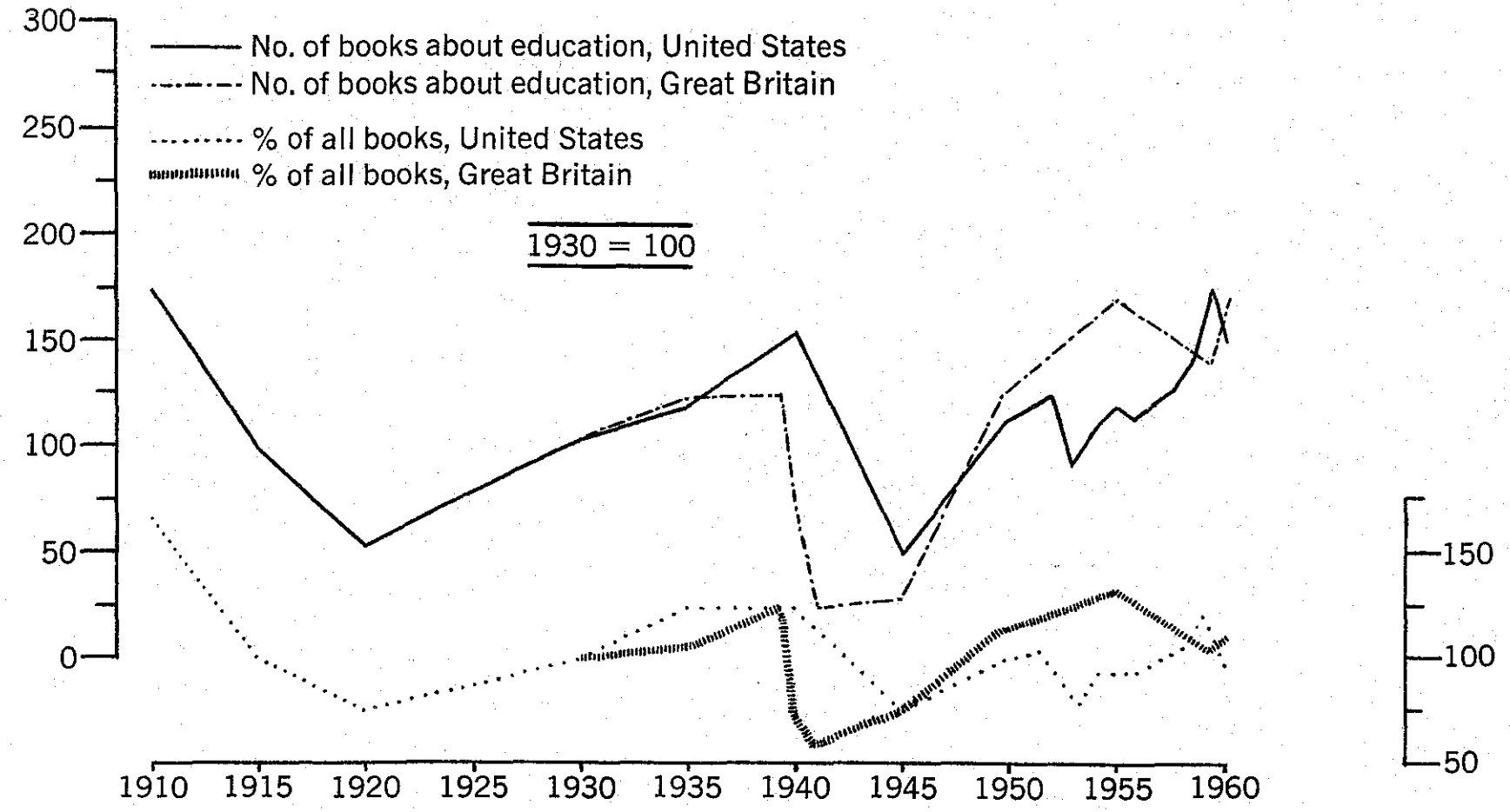
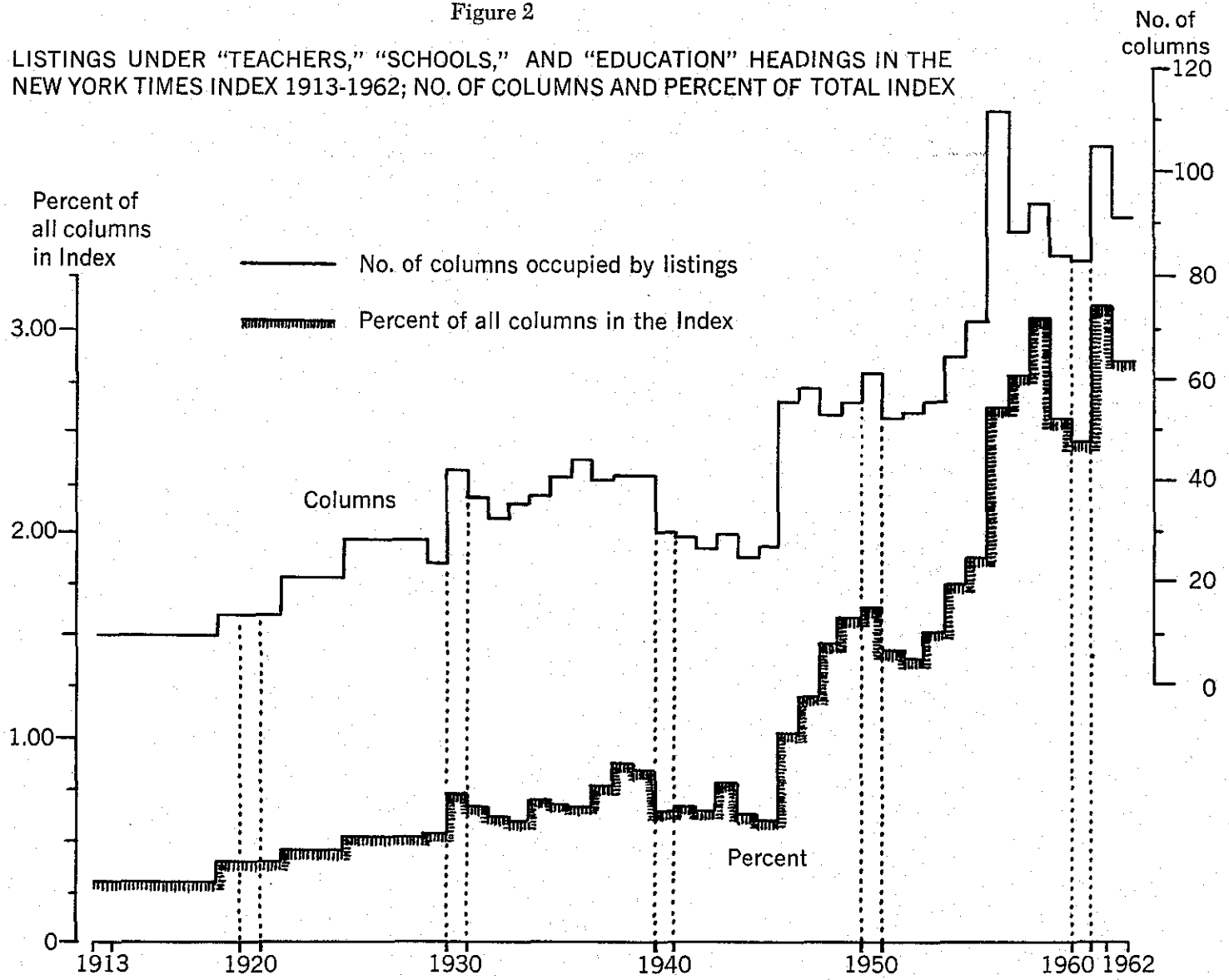


Figure 1

TRENDS IN NUMBER AND PERCENTAGE OF NEW BOOKS ABOUT EDUCATION (EXCLUDING TEXTBOOKS) PUBLISHED ANNUALLY IN UNITED STATES AND GREAT BRITAIN FROM 1910 TO 1960

Figure 2

LISTINGS UNDER "TEACHERS," "SCHOOLS," AND "EDUCATION" HEADINGS IN THE NEW YORK TIMES INDEX 1913-1962; NO. OF COLUMNS AND PERCENT OF TOTAL INDEX



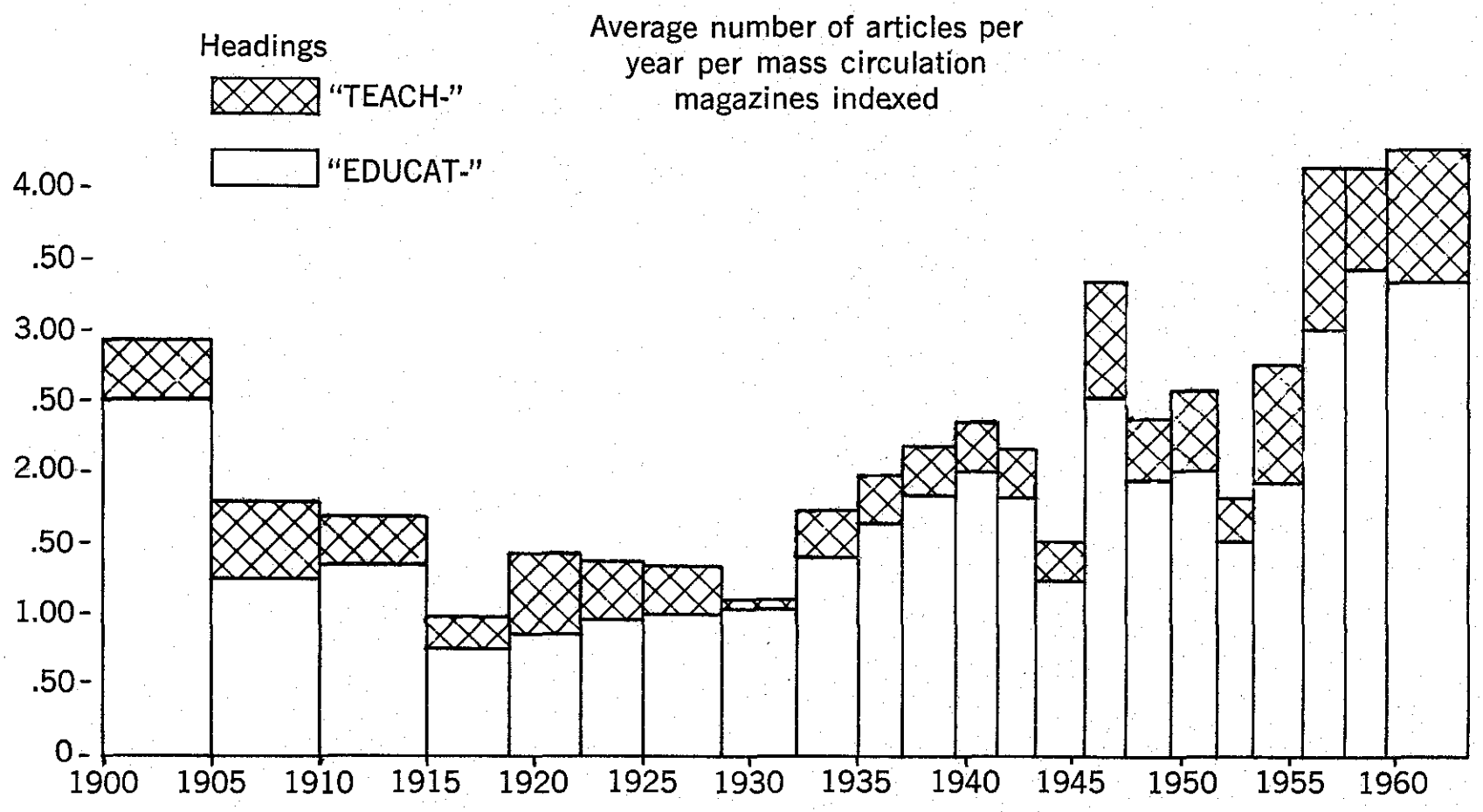


Figure 3

MASS CIRCULATION MAGAZINE ARTICLES LISTED IN THE READER'S GUIDE UNDER "EDUCAT-" AND "TEACH-" HEADINGS

est slumps were during wars and the sharpest gains in the immediate postwar periods. The postwar rise of the late forties was interrupted by a drop in the U.S., but not in Britain, in the early fifties. The post-Sputnik peak of the late fifties in the U.S. contrasted with a relative decline in England about the same time.

The New York *Times Index* was used to obtain a measure of press attention over a 50-year period in that newspaper. As we can see on Figure 2, both the number and proportion of news items about education increased considerably. However, the percentage share of these items exceeded 3 percent of all news items only in 1958 and 1961.

The slow increase in attention after World War I culminated in the spurt of 1930. In the thirties, the decline in the proportion of attention was more prolonged than it was in the amount. After the slump of World War II, both rose sharply to a peak in 1950. The dip of the early fifties turned to new heights in the number of stories by 1956, and in their percentage share by the post-Sputnik year of 1958. Attention leveled off after that. It is interesting to note that the bulk of the increase since 1959 was due to news of school integration.

Similar trends were found in popular magazines. The most characteristic features of the pattern (shown on Figure 3) are the slumps of attention in depression and war, the sharp rise especially in the post-World War II period, the decline in the early fifties, and the leveling off after Sputnik.

Without going into it in any detail, let me mention that we found similar trends in the portrayal of schools and teachers in Hollywood movies, in comic strips, and even on magazine covers. These trends cut across media. The magnitudes were generally below 5 percent of total media allocations, as was the percentage of gross national product spent for education.

It may not be too far-fetched to suggest, therefore, that the allocation of attention is related to that of resources, that media play a part in the process, and that the whole system of allocations may best be seen in the light of fundamental social developments.

Media Attention to Education and Social Developments

We have observed a high level of media attention to education before 1910. Such attention reflected the peak of the vocational education and the progressive movements. Propelled by "muckraking" journalism, these movements resulted in the passage of federal grants for specific programs of most direct usefulness to the rapidly rising industrial forces.

World War I brought further business expansion and the passage of federal legislation establishing vocational education programs. Mass media attention slumped, to be revived after the war by the discovery that the basic problems remained. Draft board records revealed that close to 25 percent of the draftees were illiterate, that surprisingly large numbers did not speak English, and that the great majority of the one-third who were physically unfit suffered from defects that could have been remedied if identified at school age. But the initial burst of enthusiasm faltered under the postwar counterattack against "radical" reform. Few of the remedial measures advocated, and none of the federal aid bills introduced, came to pass. Pressure was brought to bear to operate schools according to the principles of "scientific management" and "sound business administration," despite the fact that education had no reliable measure of its "sales." A professional corps of public school administrators emerged. School public relations became a recognized specialty.

The crash of 1929 directed major mass media attention to the convulsions of the economic system and to their political repercussions. The proportion of news and magazine stories devoted to education declined to its lowest point since World War I. Educational expenditures also declined by one-fourth, although the drop in national income was even sharper. Public school systems in many states were near collapse. Over 25 emergency aid bills were introduced in Congress; none passed. Education had a depression but not a New Deal.

The gradual shift to war production accompanied and stimulated economic recovery, but also defeated attempts to allocate major new resources to the still depressed educational enterprise. Although dollar expenditures and mass media attention devoted to education increased slowly until the outbreak of World War II, both declined sharply during the war. The percentage of gross national product invested in education in 1944 was less than half the 1932 percentage. Mass media attention was also at its lowest since World War I and the depression. Few new schools were built during the war, and the school plant had further deteriorated. Teachers left the profession in droves. Inflation hit hard those who remained. The first wave of "war babies" began to flood the elementary schools. School systems expanded their community information activities. Listings under "Public Relations" in the *Encyclopedia of Educational Research* increased from four studies in 1941 to six pages in 1950. Mass media attention zoomed, as we have seen on the graphs, riding the crest of the general reformist zeal of the postwar years.

The watershed of high hopes appears to have been 1948. The G.I. Bill of Rights had given American higher education its biggest boost since the land grants and Morrill Acts of the last century. A federal aid bill had failed to clear the House Committee by a single vote and it was expected that favorable action could now be secured. Selective service rejections during the war had emphasized continuing illiteracy. The post-war teacher and classroom shortages and a rash of teacher strikes further dramatized the demand for action. But the confidence proved misplaced. As after World War I, the counterattack which was to dash hopes of fundamental reform had already begun.

Tax and bond elections provided opportunities for attacks on weakened and vulnerable school districts. The power structure of most communities was, by and large, unable or unwilling either to accept local solutions adequate to the needs or to share the burden — and possibly control over resource-allocation — with the federal government. The federal aid bill was defeated and the percentage of gross national income devoted to education actually declined.

The critical years between 1948 and 1953 saw the gathering and clashing of forces that were to shape American education, and perhaps national development itself, for decades ahead. This period, more than Sputnik or anything else, appears to hold the key to the riddle of the system of allocating attention, values, and resources. The apparent promise — or threat — of the movement for a major re-direction and re-allocation of national resources brought forth a largely demagogic assault on "progressive education." The main effect was political and economic rather than educational. The postwar reform movement collapsed under the counterattack of the combined political, economic, and military pressures which characterized the so-called McCarthy era and the period of the Korean war.

The mass media played an ambivalent role. The proportion of attention directed to education declined, along with the relative allocation of financial resources, in the early fifties. Many newspapers became the primary vehicles for the counterattacking forces, and other media either abetted or were intimidated by the onslaught. The turbulent "era" of the early fifties first reduced the volume of attention and then changed the complexion of the coverage. After 1953-54, rising media attention reflected the controversies over school integration and the new criticism of the schools. This new criticism, for which the setbacks of the early fifties provided ample ground, featured educators themselves in ever-increasing numbers. The new criticism paved the way for the orgy of finger-pointing and pedagogical soul-searching

released by Sputnik in 1957. Sputnik seems to have signalled the culmination rather than the origin of a period of searching public attention. Special-purpose programs were launched again, and the rate of research and innovation accelerated. But the massive re-allocation of attention, values, and resources required to remedy the accumulated neglect that came to light, let alone to meet fully the imperatives of a technological age, was not forthcoming. Media attention leveled off again after 1958.

Today, in my own city of Philadelphia, a recent survey found two-thirds of the city's public school pupils "culturally disadvantaged."[3] It has taken us since 1890 to triple the rate of our investment in education. Dr. Jean Grambs suggests in her excellent new book on *Schools, Scholars, and Society* that this would have to be tripled again right now in order to do justice to every child in the schools and to utilize fully both human and technological resources available. No wonder that historian Lawrence Cremin wrote recently that education may be the most subtle, intricate, and complex political problem facing the American people.[4] And Walter Lippmann commented last October that "The more we study and ponder the nature and dangers of poverty in our society, the more we have to face the fact that as a whole, with only some conspicuous exceptions, our system of education – public, parochial, and private – is starved. The American school system as a whole is not big enough and strong enough to educate successfully the American people. My own belief is," wrote Lippmann, "that in the days to come our paramount duty is to persuade the American voters that a second-rate system of education is no more tolerable than a second-rate system of national defense. If this nation is to succeed and flourish as it ought to do, the day will have to come when the American people will be as willing to tax themselves for good schools as they are today for good nuclear missiles."[5]

While I would not equate investment in people with their destruction, I do agree that the day will have to come when the investment in one will match what we now invest in the other. That, I think, is the prerequisite for the full development and proper utilization of technology and education. Before that day comes, however, we must understand more of the process of education about education itself. I have tried to show that this process is part of the general allocation of attention, values, and resources which may well determine the future viability of our culture.

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[3] The Philadelphia *Inquirer*, March 21, 1965.

[4] *Supra.*

[5] *Washington Post*, October 15, 1964.