Theodore Peterson
Dean, College of Journalism
and Communications
University of Illinois
Urbana, Illinois

THE IMPLICATIONS OF THE POPULATION EXPLOSION FOR COMMUNICATIONS

Talk at the 4 A's Central Region Meeting,
Continental Hotel, Chicago, Oct. 21, 1964

Many years ago, when William Saroyan blithely announced that he was going to write a book about child care, so the story goes, a friend asked him what his qualifications were. "Well," Saroyan said, "I am a former child."

My qualifications for speculating on the implications of the population explosion for communications are a little on the same order. As a father of four children, I have added my little bit of noise to the population explosion; as a student and teacher, I have been keeping an eye on the mass media for a couple of decades. However, my hindsight has always been more clear-eyed and perceptive than my foresight; I, for instance, would never have shared Mr. Hefner's optimistic conviction that grown men would find it delightful to have their booze served by young girls with rabbit ears. Moreover, the Creator does not customarily ask my advice on what He should be doing next. What I have to say, then, is no more than a reasonable man might say under the circumstances, given the fact of the population explosion and the nature of our communications system.

In speculating on the future of communications, I find it hard to divorce the population explosion from such things as advances in science and technology and education. In other words, I feel constrained to discuss the population explosion in the context of our own industrialized, democratic society. After all, other parts of the world have been feeling the

reverberations of the population explosion for years; yet they have lagged far behind the U.S. in the development of their systems of mass communication. For each hundred inhabitants of a country, UNESCO has set a minimum communications need of at least ten copies of daily papers, five radio sets, two cinema seats and two TV sets. Nearly 70 percent of the world's population lives in countries with less than that minimum. On the other hand, just as we Americans are affluent in material goods, so we are affluent in our communications system. You know the statistics as well as I: Until two years ago, the U.S. had more than half of the world's TV sets. It has more radio sets than it does people. Nearly 87 percent of its households get at least one newspaper on an average day, and some 80 percent of all homes get magazines. I am not intending to sound chauvinistic; I am simply setting up an advance excuse in case my aim sometimes strays from just the implications of the population explosion to the implications of technology, education and such other things as well.

I will break what I have to say, like all of Gaul and Mr. Hefner's Playmates, into three parts--first, some remarks about communications in general; second, some remarks about the media individually; and third, some remarks about media content.

My first point is so obvious that I am a little embarrassed to make it: A large population in a nation such as ours can support a large communication system. Although that point is obvious, it apparently has not been accepted by a good many people; for every so often, someone mutters that the newspaper is vanishing or that magazines are going the way of the Great Auk.

The record shows, though, that as the population and industrial output have grown, so has our system of mass communication. As each new medium has come along, it has managed to find a place at the boarding-house table and to grow fat on what it has found there. Magazines did not kill off the infant newspaper. Movies did not kill off the magazine. Radio did not kill off the

movies. And television has not killed off much of anything except on the picture tube itself. Indeed, in all of history, I know of only one communications medium that has died--the broadside, which was born even before Mr. Caxton set up his printing press in England in 1476 and reported topical events in prose and poesy until the newspaper and other media killed it off in the last years of the nineteenth century.

The hardiness of the media is all the more impressive, I think, in view of the curious response of the old media to their new competitors. Time and again the old media have tried to beat the newcomers on the newcomers' own ground. When TV with its miniscule screen invaded the American living room, for instance, the movies responded with panavision and vistavision and took their profits from the captive audience of popcorn eaters willing to pay six bits to see a Kim Novak with nine-foot eyeballs. When a single TV program was able to induce euphoria in 15 million Americans all at once, magazines decided that they too would have to demonstrate a wide reach and with loud huzzahs raced off to pick up another million subscribers.

As the population of our industrialized society continues to grow, we will have even more facilities for mass communication than we do now. In the years ahead, we face the possibility of as many as 2,000 UHF channels; and TV manufacturers, having already got their products into 92 percent of all homes, are now beginning to market tiny transistorized "personal" receivers so we can have the Beverly Hillbillies wherever we go. More than that, manufacturers show promise of overcoming one of TV's big disadvantages--the necessity of being on hand at a given time if one wants to watch a given program. Last April the Fairchild Camera and Instrument company demonstrated a home TV tape recorder that will capture programs for later viewing and that can be mass-produced for under $500. The company is considering a camera for taking home TV movies that would sell for less than $200.

Only a couple of months ago Robert Sarnoff of N.B.C. predicted the ultimate in personal communication--pocket-sized receivers permitting any individual to see and to talk with any other person, no matter where either might be and presumably whether they have anything to say to one another or not.

Although the growth in sheer numbers of persons may enable us to support a mammoth communications system, it does not necessarily follow that the communicating we do will be especially efficient. The size of the system of itself may contribute to the inefficiency. We will be doing so damned much communicating, in short, that what we are saying may get lost in the process. Let us take your business for a couple of examples.

The growth of the media will probably make advertising less efficient rather than more efficient. Someone will have to pay for all of the communicating that we will be doing, and the media operators will continue to look hopefully to you. For one thing, as their expenses continue to increase, so will yours, Last June, Gail Smith, director of advertising and marketing research for General Motors, reported a forecast his company had made of the cost of maintaining its present advertising schedules in 1970. Overall, he said, the media mix and the volume level employed by GMC this year will probably require 30 to 40 percent more dollars to duplicate in 1970. As he saw it, the cost of maintaining present schedules will increase between 28 and 38 percent for newspapers, between 35 and 45 percent for network TV, between 30 and 40 percent for spot TV and between 45 and 55 percent for magazines.

For another thing, your advertising messages are going to meet increasing competition--not just from other advertising messages but from the other parts of the media and from all of the other activities that people would rather engage in than sit attentively while you make your sales pitch. Already a few advertisers are beginning to grumble that the media carry so much advertising that it divides the attention of the consumer--by which I suppose they mean that it would be nice if everyone else would shut up for

a while so they could be heard by their prospects. In a happy yesteryear, when the media were fewer and so were products on retailers' shelves, an advertiser could make a big noise for a few thousand dollars. Back in 1893, for instance, Mellin Foods paid $15,000 for the full back page of Youth's Campanion, which carried a fifteen-color lithograph of a child by a French artist and a small block of copy. There was universal astonishment that the cost of those 86 words of copy came to $174 each--a rate considerably lower than that collected by Wallie Butts from the Saturday Evening Post for a peice of copy he didn't even write. As our communications facilities expand, as more and more products compete in the marketplace, as more and more activities claim the time and attention of consumers, the cost of getting the ear or eye of your prospects is going to be substantially larger than now.

But size is probably the least important thing that we need fret about. Some other aspects of the population explosion have greater implications for our communications system--the changing age distribution of our population, the mobility of our people, the rising level of education, the continued trend toward urbanization, and so on. They might well make it much harder for us to talk with one another on basic issues than in the past.

For one thing, despite the vast number of people we will have jostling one another about, we probably will continue to be a nation of groups, some floating and loosely-joined, some durable and tightly-knit, some large, some small. Whenever a number of people find themselves together, they start sorting themselves out into little groups, cliques or factions. Anyone who has ever watched the martini-sipping atoms at a cocktail party swirl about and form into little clusters should know what I am talking about. Much the same thing happens in the population as a whole. People with similar backgrounds, similar values, similar tastes, similar interests start banding together, and our

system of communications now lets them do so on a national scale. When enough of them get together, they start to institutionalize their communication. They work out a specialized language as a kind of shorthand and as a means of excommunicating outsiders, just as you advertising people, we academic types, pickpockets and teenagers have all developed argots of our own. Eventually they line up some specialist to facilitate communication among members of the group and to help the group speak to outlanders. As every city editor suspects, three Americans cannot meet on a streetcorner without appointing a publicity chairman and starting to issue a newsletter. In medicine, individual clinics have their editors to help physicians get their messages across to other physicians, and so does the American Medical Writers Association. The A.M.A. has a crew of editors to handle communication among and within its membership, a public relations department and the magazine Today's Health to speak to laymen.

Even in some groups, the tremendous bulk of communication has buried the individual message. For instance, some of my friends in the sciences tell me that it often is easier to run off an experiment than to search the literature to learn if the findings have already been reported. Scientific communications are piling up at a swiftly accelerating rate. I understand that it took Chemical Abstracts thirty-two years to index its first million articles, sixteen for its second million, seven and a half for its third million and only three plus years for its fourth million. In medicine, the National Library of Medicine is now grappling with the enormous task of indexing the 150,000 articles that appear each year in 2,500 medical journals in 40 languages and classifying each article under some ten headings. Inevitably, technology has been recruited to assist; the index is being committed to punched tape, fed into computers.

But again the problems raised by quantity may well be the least of our worries. In some ways, this splintering of our population into groups may make for efficient communication. An advertiser peddling chemical fertilizer, for instance, need only to plug in on the communication system of farmers to reach a good many persons who are prime prospects and to freeze out most of whom are not. In doing so, I scarcely need add, he should be able to speak the language of the group.

But in other ways, this splintering of the population may make it increasingly difficult for Americans to talk with one another and even possibly to transact the nation's serious business. As our information becomes more and more specialized, members of one group may find that they can speak to members of other groups in little more than inanities. To members, the values of the group may be crucial in deciding what they think and do. Because the experiences of the group may be so intense, so pervasive of the personality, a member of one group may find it virtually impossible to establish rapport with members of other groups. What this means at a superficial level is that a media buyer in New York may have far more in common with a media buyer in Chicago than either have with their nextdoor neighbors. What it means at a more significant level is that a man who has never been black may find it difficult if not impossible, despite his huge reservoir of good will, to understand his Negro fellow citizen.

All of what I have been saying has some implications for the mass media. I will allude to some of them when I discuss the media individually, to some when I discuss content.

When I predicted a continuing growth of our communication system, I did not necessarily mean that the present media would roll along unchanged. Let us speculate briefly on some of the things that might happen to the various media--first to the newspaper.

The trend toward urbanization, begun in the 19th century, evidently will continue so that by the end of the present decade two-thirds of us will be living in metropolitan areas, one-third of us in places with populations of more than a million.

The metropolitan daily cannot help but be affected by this drift, as indeed it already has been. One of the publishing phenomenon since World War II has been the swift rise of the suburban press, which has challenged the market of the metropolitan dailies. My guess is that the suburban papers have taken on one of the functions that the mtetopolitan deilies served in the late 19th century, when they helped immigrants adjust to the customs, mores and tongue of this strange new land. Today, in a sociaty as mobile as ours, we are all in a sense immigrants at one time or another, and we seek help in acclimating ourselves to our new surroundings. The suburban press probably gives that help to a growing number of people; the corporate vice president moving from New Canaan to Kenilworth probably finds the suburban paper a good handbook for learning the values, mores and taboos of his new community, just as his wife finds it a good directory to the shops and supermarkets. More than that, the suburban press seems to be in a good position to deal with the issues and problems that confront its readers as parents, taxpayers and citizens of a community.

Meanwhile, as my associate James Carey has observed, metropolitan dailies have taken on a distinctly national flavor. To be sure, they cover local news and even suburban news. Yet the overwhelming bulk of their content seems to be international, national or regional. Their columnists are nationally-syndicated and deal with national affairs from a national viewpoint; even their editorial writers, more often than not, deal with global or national issues. For its typical reader, then, the metropolitan daily is becoming more and more a locally-produced printed record of news and views of international, national and regional matters.

I do not intend to suggest that metropolitan newspapers have neither a function nor a future, although I confess that I am not quite as bullish about them as S. I. Newhouse apparently is. But I do suspect that their number will decrease and that smalltown and community papers may have a brighter future.

Magazines have long been a special interest of mine, and in the past couple of years I have speculated about their future so often that I sometimes feel as if I would be quite at home in 1984.

Stoutly resisting the temptation to devote the rest of my time to magazines, I will mention just a few developments that the population explosion will make possible. The growth of the population has already halped make possible one that I think will continue--the split-run and regional edition. When regionals first appeared in the late fifties, some advertising men predicted that they would not last because their high costs would exceed the business they would generate. The regionals, in fact, have been costly. For one thing, the fast magazine presses on which they are produced were not designed for them; as a result, the presses work at perhaps 40 percent efficiency. For another thing, the regionals have created a multitude of logistical, storage and production problems, all of which add to their cost. Even so, I am convinced that they will remain with us.

What will probably happen, as the population grows and the trend toward urbanization continues, is that magazines will cut up their total circulation into smaller and smaller geographical units. A few magazines already are publishing editions for such large population centers as New York and Los Angeles. As more and more people crowd into metropolitan areas, at least some magazines will be able to achieve huge circulations within narrow geographical territories. Even now, the Reader's Digest sells considerably more than a million copies of just its New York metropolitan edition.

What will probably also happen is that magazines will sell advertisers access to special consumer blocs within their total circulations. Suppose, for instance, that an advertiser wants to reach only college professors with incomes of more than $20,000--a mighty thin market, I will grant. From demographic data on its subscription cards, a magazine would use computers to sort out those happy professors from within its multi-million circulation, just as it could sort out urban apartment dwellers with incomes of more than $10,000, homeowners with two cars and three children, or retired couples on a pension. _Time_ has foreshadowed this development with its special inserts for physicians and college students. In a way, _Farm Journal_ has demonstrated its feasibility with its quarterly hog extra and its recently inaugurated dairy and beef extras.

Because of the increasing work load of obstetricians, I suspect that magazines catering to special interests will have a happy future. As you know, the special interest magazine has enjoyed a boom since World War II. Although I am not suggesting that magazines of general appeal will vanish, I am suggesting that magazines of sharply focused editorial appeal hava a number of things working for them. One I mentioned earlier--the tendency of our population to splinter into little groups. The proponents of nuclear disarmament have spawned a remarkable number of periodicals in recent years, and the support that Mr. Welch, Mr. Buckley and Mr. Goldwater have given to conservatism in its many and curious manifestations has no doubt been responsible for the plethora of conservative journals of opinion that have sprouted up. Along with that has been the expanding range of activities and interests of the American people--boating, camping, folk-singing, rock-collecting, dieting, gourmet cooking, skin-diving, hot rodding, hi-fi listening, doily-making, bowling, gun-collecting and so forth. Another is that, as the population grows, a number of these interests and activities will have enough adherents to support magazines of

considerable circulation. If one were to produce a magazine for snorers, a venture which really has little to commend it to either editor or advertiser, I will grant, consider how his market has expanded. Using figures in Clinical Medicine, I would guess that the number of snorers in the U.S. will have grown from 19,000,000 in 1940 to some 26,000,000 by 1970. My point is that in just raw numbers there will be substantial markets for some periodicals of sharply focused editorial appeal since they can become the only continuing source of information about the specialty.

Television too will inevitably feel the impact of the population explosion. Indeed, I would rashly suggest a dimished importance of TV networks in the years ahead as a result of population growth in urban centers, the broadened range of activities and interests of Americans, a rising level of public taste and technological developments in electronics.

On the one hand, a network is by no means essential for most of the programs a station carries. Network affiliation may be mighty handy when there is a national political convention or a Presidential inauguration, but in the future it may not be necessary for even them. When I watch our local WCIA-TV, I get no big thrill just because Matt Dillon comes galloping to the station from CBS rather than directly from some packager, and I get no exquisite delight because 9,540,000 other homes are tuned in at the same time as ours. Advertisers evidently like the convenience and prestige of a network show, although I suspect they could manage to find other ways of tucking their money into the pockets of station owners if they were convinced that it was more economical and efficient to do so.

On the other hand, I think it doubtful that the present network system can supply the diversity of program fare that a huge, variegated, densely-populated nation is willing to pay for. I doubt that I am giving away any trade secrets by saying that there is a certain sameness to television fare at any given hour or day or even season.

Let me mention just a few of the developments that, along with the population explosion, may alter the nature and functions of the networks. Last spring E. William Henry, chairman of the F.C.C., told broadcasters some of them. He said that transmission of communications by wire and microwave is becoming less expensive, that low cost cable may soon be available and that experiments in transmitting TV signals over a pair of telephone wires are under way. Widespread toll-TV seems inevitable in one fashion or many--either by direct broadcast, by community antenna systems, by wired closed circuits, or by some combination of all of those means. Already some 1,200,000 homes are wired for closed circuit television, and their number is growing by about 15,000 a month. When Mr. Clay and Mr. Mr. Liston had their brief encounter earlier this year, some 475,000 persons saw the fight on closed circuit. The spectacle was there for the watching in another 200,000 homes linked to the 88 community antenna systems that subscribed to the closed circuit relay.

As more and more people crowd into urban areas, I think it inevitable that entrepreneurs will link an impressive percentage of U.S. households into a wired closed circuit system that will offer subscribers a choice of programs. Developers already have a $25 million system under way in California, where the high density of homes makes the wiring possible at low unit cost. Because no radio energy is involved, no F.C.C. license is now required to set up such a system. The California project has already encountered more troubles than Helen Trent, and pay-TV and CATV generally have met a good deal of resistance from those with a vested interest in the status quo. Yet I have the feeling that over the long run the opponents are trying to sweep back the tide with a broom.

Besides all of those developments, there is the possibility of direct world-wide TV and radio broadcasts from space satellites by the end of the decade. And we have yet to see the effects of the recent requirement that

~~all TV sets be equipped with UHF and VHF~~

all TV sets be equipped with UHF and VHF receivers. As the population explosion expands old markets and creates new ones, I suspect that we may see a good many UHF stations spring up. When he was chairman of the F.C.C., Newton Minow spoke of the possibility of a fourth network to serve the UHF stations. My own guess is that they really will not need a network. My guess is that, as tape recorders become less expensive to buy and operate and as other forms of transmission become economical, the stations will be able to draw on independent packagers for the bulk of their program fare. My further timid guess is that advertisers eventually will be quite willing to deal directly with them because of their overall flexibility and economy and because of the efficiency they will afford in reaching clearly defined audiences in populous areas.

Although there is a heavy load of conjecture in those remarks about the direction in which broadcasting will be moving, I think that I have spotted the general neighborhood if not the precise street.

In the years ahead, I think that the media may have some problems in effectively addressing their audiences. One of the possible problems may arise directly as a result of the population explosion. No matter how I read the various population projections, I find agreement that teenagers and young adults will be swarming the land by the end of the decade. Already they make up a market that some advertisers and some media, especially radio, are trying to reach. Even today more than 40 percent of all brides are teenagers, according to one estimate, and teenage girls spend some $4.2 billion a year for clothing, another $450 million for cosmetics. Now, anyone who has ever heard a young daughter protest, "But, *Daddy*!" realizes the difficulties that one generation sometimes has in trying to communicate with another. For some time to come, I suspect, the media will continue to be run by us old codgers who recall such battles of antiquity as Omaha Beach and Pork Chop Hill. Yet somehow the men who run the media

will have to carry on a meaningful discourse with an audience separated from them in time, in shared experience, in beliefs and quite probably in values.

Yet another difficulty our media may have trouble adjusting to is the rising level of education and sophistication in our growing population. When the century turned, the average American left school at age twelve. The average pupil probably attended school for fewer than four months a year, and he probably put in 4½ years at the most. At least 10 percent of all Americans above the age of ten were illiterate. By 1960 four out of five young people completed high school, two out of five were in college and one in twenty was working for a graduate degree. That trend is likely to continue. More than that, though, is an increasing sophistication on the part of young people. Part of the credit, I suppose, can go to television. Sitting before a picture tube, even a pre-schooler has a window on the world and an angle of vision that was denied earlier generations. Before they meet up with their first Tom and Betty reader, they have been hit with the sights and sounds of political conventions, United Nations debates and space flights.

Despite H. L. Mencken's dictum that no one ever lost money underestimating the intelligence of the American people, I think there is some evidence that the media have not fully taken into account the advances in education and awareness I have been talking about. We have Gardner Cowles' public confession that _Look_ for its first fifteen years "greatly underestimated the intelligence and taste of the American public." And communications researchers have turned up some evidence that the men who edit and program the media have stereotypes of their audiences which attribute to them less knowledge and sophistication about such subjects as science and mental health than they actually possess. One of the challenges of the media is being honest enough to recognize that the nation is full of people who are bright, quick and curious and being brave enough to do something about it in their content.

All of those problems will appear trivial, I think, compared with the final one I would like to mention. The population explosion has not been confined to the white middle class, and one of the massive tasks confronting the nation is the overdue integration of the Negro. If the Negro is to become truly integrated, to become a citizen whose rights are not forever questioned and whose feelings are not forever ignored, the mass media must take on some heavy responsibilities and face up to some difficult problems. For genuine integration cannot be achieved simply by showing Negro models in advertisements or by hiring Negro weather girls for TV or by regarding the Negro as just another market, although I am cynical enough to think those measures may gain him ground. If integration is to be achieved, media content ultimately must treat the Negro not as a Negro but as a fellow citizen, one whose deeds and portrayal rest on the same basis as those of other Americans and not on the basis of race.

Ultimately too the media must regard the Negro as part of their total audience. The Negro makes less use of the media than the typical white citizen; and because of his cultural background, the use he does make is quite different. Or at least that is what the fragmentary evidence suggests. For instance, the TV program ranking top with Negroes (the Jackie Gleason show) ranked thirteenth among all viewers, according to a study made by Data, Inc., and the program ranking thirtieth in popularity among all viewers ("The Defenders") reached nearly twice as many Negro families as the overall favorite, the Beverly Hillbillies. Of 30 magazines covered, only _Ebony_ and _Life_ drew more than 5 percent of their audiences from Negro families.

In assimilating the Negro into their audiences, the media will encounter discouraging difficulties in cross-cultural communication. The difficulties will not be must a matter of education, although that will be part of it;

they will include so elementary a thing as his sometime lack of linguistic skill. His life of poverty and discrimination has given him experiences totally different from those of middle-class editors, broadcasters and advertising people, and those experiences will certainly impede communication. Lest we forget just how different those experiences are, I remind you that as recently as my own boyhood students at the University of Missouri swelled the mob of 500 that lynched a Negro janitor at the university because he allegedly had tried to assult the daughter of a professor, who himself was almost lynched when he tried to halt the violence.

Those, then, are some of the implications that I think the population explosion holds for communications. Whether I am correct or not, I have no idea; but I welcome you to stick around to check up of my assessment.