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Education About Education by Mass Media

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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 fifteen 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. Change occurs against a background of the allocation of attention, values, and resources. 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 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

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

We are indebted to Professor GEORGE GERBNER *not only for an article about education, but also for a genuine interest in it. He has been a student of the school's image as portrayed in the mass media both here and abroad. He has also studied the value patterns of America implicit in its popular fiction. Formerly in the Department of Communications at the University of Illinois, he is now dean of The Annenberg School of Communications at the University of Pennsylvania.*

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.

The industrial revolution and its extension into the field of communications and culture transformed the physical, social, and symbolic environment through which a member of the species *Homo Sapiens* becomes some sort of a human creature. My purpose is to sketch the relationship between the two cultural offsprings of this 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 the 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 descendant 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 technologically-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. Mass media are in business to produce and sell publics, although 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 fully 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.

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 needs 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 (Gross National Product). At any rate, both the rate of increase in GNP and the percentage of GNP spent for all types of formal education in the U.S. fluctuated between three and five per cent 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 per cent of all privately published books (excluding textbooks) dealt with education; the 1960 figure was

[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.

three per cent. Various measures indicate an average of four per cent of news content devoted to education news, schools, and teachers. Mass circulation popular magazines devoted about two per cent of their nonadvertising space and three to four per cent of all articles to 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 fifty years. First, books about education, which, as we have noted, averaged 2.5 per cent of all privately published titles (excluding textbooks). Figure 1 shows trends over a fifty-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 deepest 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 fifty-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 three per cent 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.

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 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 five per cent of total media allocations. So was the percentage of GNP spent for education.

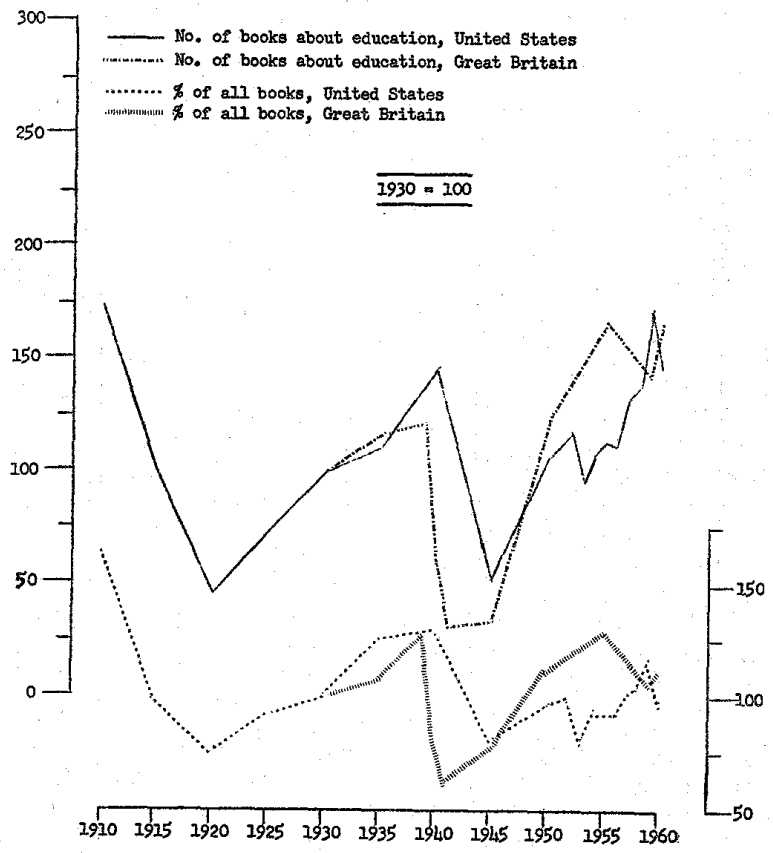

FIGURE 1. Trends in Number and Percentage of New Books About Education (Excluding Textbooks) Published Annually in United States and Great Britain from 1910 to 1960.

It may not be too far-fetched to suggest 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.

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

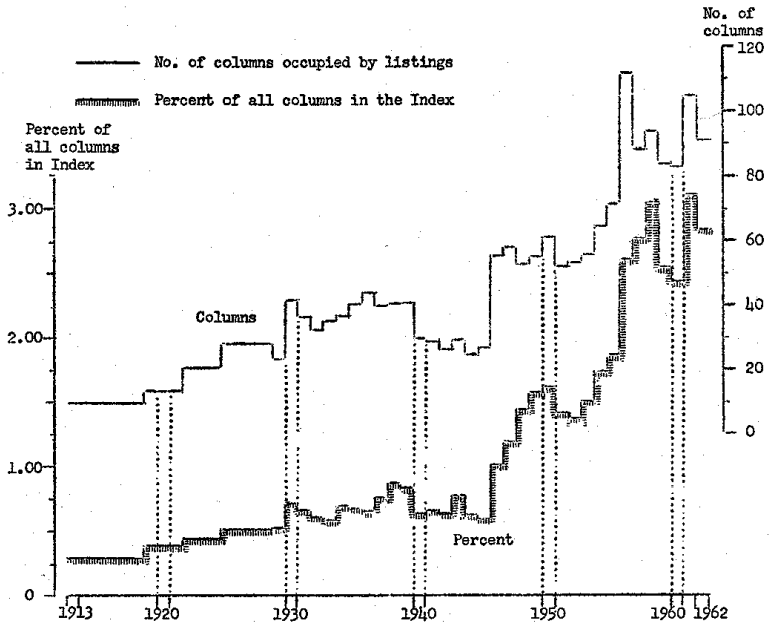

FIGURE 2. Listings Under "Teachers," "Schools," and "Education" Headings in the New York Times Index 1913-1962; No. of Columns and Percent of Total Index.

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 twenty-five per cent 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.

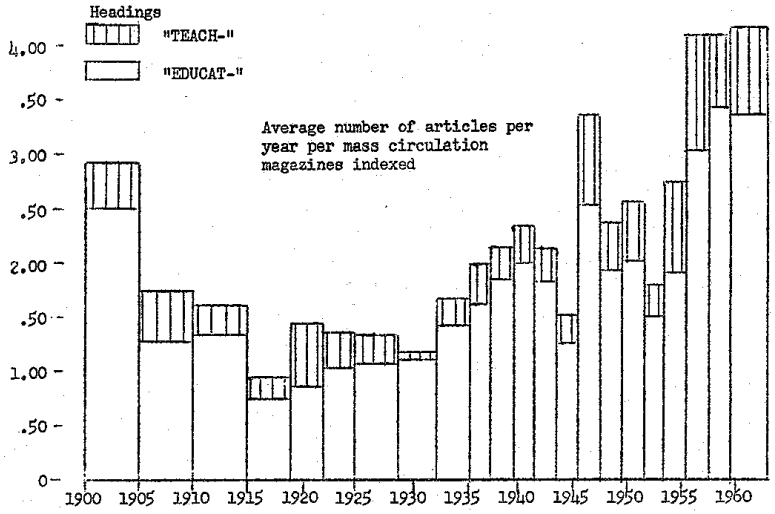

FIGURE 3. Mass Circulation Magazine Articles Listed in the Reader's Guide Under "Educat-" and "Teach-" Headings.

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 their lowest point since World War I. Educational expenditures also declined by one-fourth, although the drop in national incomes was even sharper. Public school systems in many states were near collapse. Over twenty-five 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. Few new schools were built, 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 Grant 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 postwar 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 governing groups of most communities were, 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 (which is the critical issue, *not* curriculum)—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. The apparent promise—or threat—of the movement for a major redirection and reallocation of national resources brought forth a largely demagogic assault on "progressive education." The postwar reform movement collapsed under the counterattack of the combined political, economic, and military pressures which characterized the 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 attack, 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 increasing numbers. The new criticism paved the way for the orgy of fingerpointing and pedagogical soul-searching released by Sputnik in 1957. But Sputnik seems to have signalled the culmination rather than the origin of a period of intense public attention. Special-purpose programs were launched again, and the rate of research and innovation may have been accelerated. But the massive reallocation 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.

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 investment in education. Dr. Jean Grambs suggests in her 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.[4] Before that day comes, however, we must understand more of education about education itself. I have tried to show that this is part of our general allocation of attention, values, and resources, a process which may well determine the future viability of our culture.

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

[4] *Supra.*