ON CONTENT ANALYSIS AND CRITICAL RESEARCH IN MASS COMMUNICATION

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In this paper George Gerbner has presented an approach to content analysis which raises basic issues regarding its relationship to critical research. The author is assistant professor in the Institute of Communications Research, University of Illinois.

CONTENT IS the coin of the communication exchange. Its nature, functions, and study should be the subject of lively technical and philosophical debate. But they are not. Or perhaps it depends on one's focus; in the broader scope of social and physical sciences the issue of *what* is involved in observation and communication lies at the heart of fundamental controversies. But in the newer specialization that straddles this social-scientific battleground, in content analysis, the outstanding issues appear to have been settled by the authorities.

So one is compelled to tread warily for fear of either adding to the din of battle in the larger context, or of appearing to be bent on disturbing the dignity of established procedures in the specialized field. What prompts us to proceed, nevertheless, is our experience that (a) in both teaching and research it is necessary to raise—and ultimately impossible to avoid—the basic issues of social science within the field of content analysis, and (b) that established procedures tend to limit content analysis to administrative research.

When theory appears to rationalize advances in methodology rather than build a framework for critical discussion of aims, the time is ripe for a consideration of aims without prior commitment as to means. We propose to do that by advancing an approach to

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content analysis which raises basic issues through tackling them from its own vantage point, and by summarizing the case for critical research.

AN APPROACH TO CONTENT ANALYSIS

Any process may be viewed as a patterned exchange between systems. We make inferences about the nature of processes through observation of stages, or outcomes, or consequences of the exchange. We call these occasions *events;* they make it possible for the observer to infer some things about the states of systems engaged in the exchange, and about their relationships to one another.

If a party to an exchange records, represents, or encodes in conventional (social) forms some aspects of the pattern of the exchange between itself and other systems, an event has been produced which has special qualities. A hot cup of coffee is in the process of exchanging energy with its surroundings. We infer the pattern of this exchange through observation and measurement (or by taking a sip). Coffee cannot produce a formally coded communication event, isolated from that exchange, but encoding the pattern of the exchange, and expressing its own state and relationship in the exchange, such as the words "I am losing heat." We, however, can produce such an event indicative of our relationship in the exchange; we can say, "The coffee is getting cold." From that statement one can make inferences both about the process in the cup, and about the process that gave rise to the statement, i.e., our relationship to the coffee.

A *communication* is, then, a specialized, formally coded or representative social event which makes possible inferences about states, relationships, processes not directly observed. The *process* of communication is the transmission of such events and sharing of certain inferences. The *content* of communication is the sum total of warranted inferences that can be made about relationships involved in the communication event.

These inferences can be of two kinds. The first kind is the conventional associations we make when we view the communication as a generalized form or code. This is the conventional, formal meaning, such as we might find in a dictionary.

Underlying the "formal message" with its denotative and connotative associations and differential response capabilities, we see

in content the basis for inference about specific functional relations between the communicating agent or agency and other events or systems, and about actual or potential consequences. The conventional face value of a dollar bill is not the same as its actual role value in a specific exchange. The latter will reflect the objective relationships of producer, product, buyer and seller in the exchange, and some consequences of these relationships, whether or not the parties engaged in the exchange are aware of them. Similarly, the statement "It's hot here" is a linguistic type or "form" which can be isolated from its behavioral context, recorded, recoded, etc., with little or no distortion of its formal, conventional meaning. But it is not only that; once uttered—whether pleasant or unpleasant, good or bad, real or fancied—it is also a unique and irreversible event reflecting, perhaps unwittingly, an objective set of underlying relationships which prompted its utterance. The advertising slogan, "Smoke X cigarettes; they're milder," whether valid or invalid, true or false, effective or ineffective, implies a particular set of social and industrial relationships whose expression in that form leads to consequences fully understandable only in terms of these relationships and not of the explicit message alone.[1]

"Micro" and "Macro" Analysis

The "micro" analyst of communication content is interested in gathering information about persons and making predictions about their behavior. In his search for the hidden dynamics of individual behavior he utilizes communication content either as fruitful material expressive in some form of the state of an organism, or as a necessary source when information about a person is restricted to the messages produced by that individual (30).

The analyst who views content as a social event goes beyond individual behavior. His search is for the social determinants and possible consequences of both personal and institutional dynamics reflected in cultural products. His focus may be the autonomous creations of great art—whether mass reproduced or not—or it may be the everyday commodities of cultural industry.

From the former focus comes a clear statement of those tasks of content analysis which have been sidestepped in the preoccupa-

[1] It is evident that our distinctions are in contrast with those of the semioticians and "sign theorists" who see content as having reference *only* to semantic and syntactic characteristics of symbols. However, Kaplan (19) recognizes that content analysis "may, and indeed must take account of [pragmatic characteristics] in determining which aspects of content will be analyzed and in what ways."

tion with methodologies. It is from the introduction to Leo Lowenthal's *Literature and the Image of Man* (28):

> Creative literature conveys many levels of meaning, some intended by the author, some quite unintentional. An artist sets out to invent a plot, to describe actions, to depict the interrelationships of characters, to emphasize certain values; wittingly or unwittingly, he stamps his work with uniqueness through an imaginative selection of problems and personages. By this very imaginative selection . . . he presents an explicit or implicit picture of man's orientation to his society: privileges and responsibilities of classes; conceptions of work, love, and friendship, of religion, nature, and art. Through an analysis of [his] works . . . an image may be formed of man's changing relation to himself, to his family, and to his social and natural environment. . . .
>
> . . . . The specific treatment which the creative writer gives to nature or to love, to gestures and moods, to gregariousness or solitude, is a primary source for a study of the penetration of the most intimate spheres of personal life by social forces.

The analyst of literary content, as a social scientist, "has to transform the private equation of themes and stylistic means into social equations," writes Lowenthal. "In fact," he asserts, "most generalized concepts about human nature found in literature prove on close inspection to be related to social and political change." And: "Man is born, strives, loves, suffers, and dies in any society, but it is the portrayal of *how* he reacts to these common experiences that matters, since they almost invariably have a social nexus."

The "macro" analyst of mass media content deals with broad regularities in large systems of mass-produced cultural commodities. As the "micro" analyst assumes that the underlying laws of human dynamics find expression in communicative behavior, the "macro" analyst assumes that institutions, societies, and cultures manifest laws and order beyond that apparent to large numbers of people at any one time, and that systems of artifacts express objective, even if subtle or implicit, manifestations of this order. In his quest for the *system* behind the facts and forms of mass communication, the media analyst regards content as expressive of social relationship and institutional dynamics, and as formative of social patterns.

Some Tasks of the Mass Media Content Analyst

His task, analogous in certain respects to that of the cultural anthropologist, cannot be merely descriptive of his or other people's subjective impressions. For example, the anthropologist does not

see an ax handle only as a stick one could put a blade on and start chopping. To him the meaning of a cave painting is not only that it has reference to buffalos, or even that it implies certain technical skills and individual attitudes, desires, or fantasies. The major significance of artifacts is that they reflect historical human approaches to certain events; that they signify and regulate social relationships in ways their users or creators may not consciously recognize.

Egyptian mythology of a certain period may be traced to reflect the conquest of the upper Nile Valley by the people of the Delta who superimposed upon the water-gods the theological primacy of their Sun. Ancient Mesopotamian culture and religion may be seen to record and facilitate in symbolic forms a system of social relations based on the need for elaborate irrigation networks. Movable type was made possible by a long chain of technological and social revolutions; the printing of the Gutenberg Bible was a social event reflecting cultural relationships and paving the way for future revolutions.

Communications media can be regarded as historical systems of social control, conferring monopolies of knowledge through built-in "biases" (18). Some go even further in claiming that new media are inherently revolutionary in their implications, "each codifying reality differently, each concealing a unique metaphysics" (8). Distinguished analysts of mass media content cite a legal historian to the effect that, "The greatest and most far-reaching revolutions in history are not consciously observed at the time of their occurrence" (23). Be that as it may, it prompts the analysts to remark, "It is by the investigation of style that we may gain more insight into the currents of history which are usually below the threshold of consciousness."

Our contention is not so much that inherent physical characteristics of media as such, or that formal elements of style, vocabulary, syntax, are themselves of profound and direct significance. Rather it is that the nature and consequences of these elements and characteristics can be understood best if content is viewed as bearing the imprint of social needs and uses.

In the words of Leo Lowenthal (27), ". . . objective elements of the social whole are produced and reproduced in the mass media." And: "The stimulus in popular culture is itself a historical phenomenon . . .; the relation between stimulus and response is pre-

formed and prestructured by the historical and social fate of the stimulus as well as of the respondent."

The historical and social fate common to large bodies of mass media content is that they are selected and designed to be mass produced for a market. They spring from complex technological production and market relationships; they are products of an exchange between systems in which the decisive communicating agent is a modern business enterprise. Van Den Haag (38) writes:

> Unlike any other type of culture, popular culture—a full fledged style of living with a distinct pattern of feeling, thinking, believing and acting—was made possible and in the end necessary by mass production. Unless the requirements and effects of industrialization are fully grasped, popular culture does not become intelligible.

Even more specifically, unless the requirements and effects of a specific system of industrial and market relationships (such as the corporate structure) are fully grasped, mass media content analysis remains superficial. Their intimate ties to the specific industrial marketing system from which they arise give mass media materials their institutional autonomy, their implicit role-value or consequential meaning, and their underlying frame of reference.

Aside from the formal, conventional "message," mass media content bears the imprint of concrete circumstances of its creation. This includes such things as external outlook and the internal dynamics of the producing industry; its relationship to competitors; its control over resources, facilities of production, and distribution; the position of its decision makers in the industrial structure; their relationships to audiences, markets, advertising sponsors. Out of these come a set of managerial assumptions—both implicit and rationalized—reflected in large systems of content, and preforming some aspects of its perception. The social determinants of cultural industry thus find their way into the consequential meaning of the material. They are expressed not so much in conventional forms and "messages" as through patterns of selection, omission, juxtaposition, through just the way things are "looked at."

Of course, it is necessary to classify and clarify conventional meanings and widely recognized consistencies in formal content. But the full meaning of such analysis emerges through procedures which combine investigation of the objective social origin and role of the stimulus with that of the response; which search for manifestations of processes whose consequences do not depend on con-

scious intentions and perceptions. The primary tasks of the mass media content analyst lie in his attempts to *scientifically gather and test* inferences about content that may involve generally unrecognized or unanticipated consequences, to isolate and investigate consequential properties of content which escape ordinary awareness or casual scrutiny, to bring to awareness those hidden regularities of content which record and reflect objective mechanisms of a social order. The classical role of cultural scholarship as a testing ground of critical social theory is to be strengthened, broadened, and deepened—not abolished—in the analysis of mass media content through the newer, more systematic and refined methodologies.

SOME THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Berelson (5) defines communication content as "that body of meanings through symbols (verbal, musical, pictorial, plastic, gestural) which makes up the communication itself. In the classic sentence identifying the process of communication—'*who* says *what* to *whom, how,* with *what effect*'—communication content is the *what.*" His definition of content analysis is "a research technique for the objective, systematic, and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication." Lasswell, Lerner, and Pool (23) speak of "symbol" as a technical term for words that "stand for (symbolize) the attitudes of those who use them, as distinguished, for example, from 'signs,' which are words that point to (signalize) objects external to their user." In their "symbol studies" they define content analysis as "quantitative semantics" which aims at achieving objectivity, precision, and generality through the use of statistical methods.

This approach has stimulated a growing volume of output and increasing recognition. Our purpose here is not to attempt a detailed critique. The "straw man" elements in the restrictive use of quantitative versus qualitative and manifest versus latent dichotomies have been challenged elsewhere (22, 33) as resulting neither in objectivity nor necessarily in precision but quite possibly in fundamentally uncritical "scientism." The present task is to extend the theoretical underpinnings of this approach beyond the limitations of its phenomenalistic framework, to harness its methodological insights to more critical social uses, and to amplify the role of the content analyst in a broader conception of the communication process.

The Lasswellian formula, "who says what to whom, how, and with what effect" proved useful for many practical purposes. But it is too restrictive and too one-directional for a general theoretical communications model, or for a framework for critical research. For example, it places content (the "what") in a severely limited sequence. It has been amply demonstrated that *what* is said by the *who* depends also on his role as a *whom*; i.e., the communicator builds into his statement consciously and unconsciously his terms of perception as a receiver of communications, which, in turn, reflect his relationships with events of his world. Even symbols stand for attitudes, feelings, inner experiences *about* (or expressed in terms of sensory experiences of) events of an objective world. This causal thread from systems of subject-object relations to systems of content and consequences leads through the communicating agent or agency, but not necessarily through his awareness, or that of the receiver. When it comes to measuring "effects," the criterion of effectiveness in the light of conscious intentions or explicit objectives becomes insufficient except for administrative purposes. From the point of view of critical research, more interested in understanding normative aspects of the communication exchange than in appraising effectiveness on behalf of taken-for-granted objectives, a model of communication should be broadened to include certain additional features.

A General Model of Communication

The construction and some uses of such a general model was the subject of a previous *AV Communication Review* article (13). It is summarized here for the purpose of facilitating discussion in that framework. The model makes provision for (a) portraying the communicating agent in a dynamic role as both sender and receiver; (b) designating his relation with the world of events as the ultimate source of his perceptions and statements; (c) making the distinction between formal properties of the communication product, and other inferences about content; and (d) specifically designating the study of consequences (aside from effectiveness in terms of overt intentions or objectives) as an area of research.

The model has 10 basic components, some of which can be illustrated graphically. The 10 components, forming a sentence identifying the essential aspects of a communication act or sequence, appear in capital letters below, accompanied by a brief

description. The graphic model (Figure I) illustrates appropriate aspects of the verbal description.

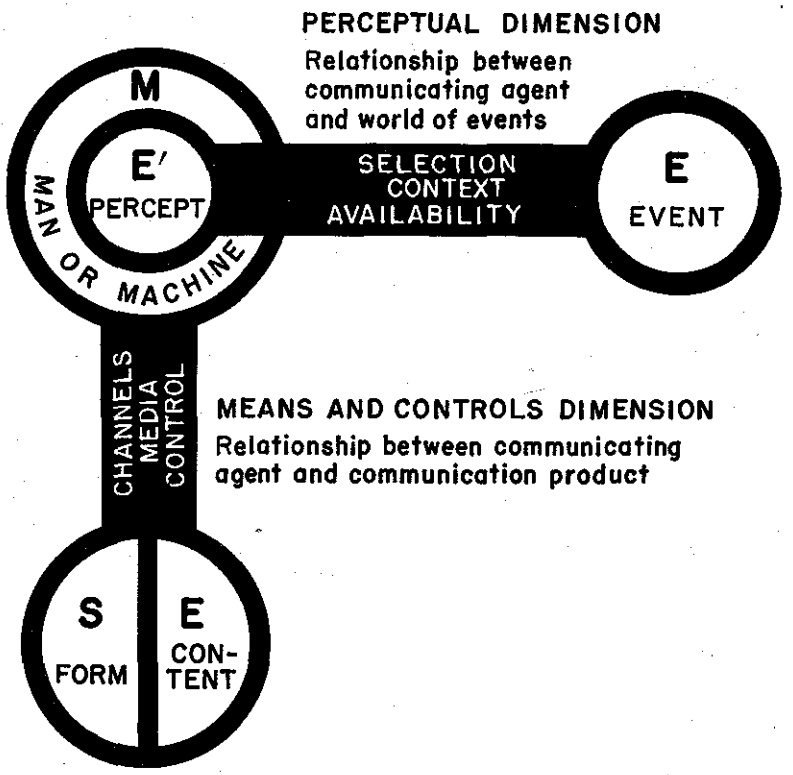

Figure I
The graphic model, illustrating certain aspects of the verbal model

(1) SOMEONE (the communicating agent or agency M engaged in an exchange with events of his world)

(2) PERCEIVES AN EVENT (the exchange—for our purposes primarily perceptual—between systems M and E; horizontal dimension of the graphic model leading from "event" E to "event as perceived" E'; including such critical consideration as M's *selection* in a certain *context* from what is *available* for perception either directly or through the mediation of communication events)

product is viewed as a specific social event whose consequential meaning may be constant through variation in form, or may vary when form is held constant.

What we are discussing here is *not* the fact that words have different denotative or connotative meanings; that the sounds "horse" may refer to an animal, or to a condition of the vocal cords; that situation and context alter conventional meanings; that individual responses vary; or even that words (or other signals) may be used for strategic reasons to mask rather than reveal intentions. Rather, we are discussing the fact that a communication event may reveal something about the systematic exchange that produced it, quite apart from what we think it means, or what we intend it to mean.

We may analyze a photograph not to get responses to its conventional forms, but to determine the position of the camera or angle of lighting recorded in it. We may study a series of whiskey advertisements, not to determine their effects on sales, or on ideas about whisky, but to make some inferences about more subtle social relationships recorded and reflected in them (such as the frequency with which their image of the "good life" involves the services of Negro waiters or Philippino busboys).

Content as an expression of objective relationships may be implicit in selection, omission, context, juxtaposition, point of view, etc., or it may be inferred through circumstantial or situational association. In that sense, consequential meaning is far from being an "arbitrary" convention. It is the property of a specific event or system of events. Every utterance of the English word "horse" (animal) is a unique event, socially determined through a long chain of associations in certain cultural context with a certain type of animal which became domesticated at a certain point in history, and has continued to be one of the events people communicate about. In doing so they express an objective historical relationship toward it. Semanticists and semioticians notwithstanding, there is, in this sense, something "horsy" about the word "horse." The "map" is not the "territory" but a map does involve a mapmaker's relationship to territory, determined socially and historically in terms of the territory as well as of the individual mapmaker.

Consider the study of a system of mass media products, e.g., male adventure magazine covers. Suppose formal analysis has indicated that the patterns of violent struggle with nature in juxta-

position with sex fears dominate most covers. Significant questions of content analysis might then be derived from our model by relating this communication event (SE) to the other aspects (see also Figure II):

In what ways does this material reflect *physical and social qualities* of communicating agencies (publishers), and their relationships to other systems such as markets, advertisers, audiences,

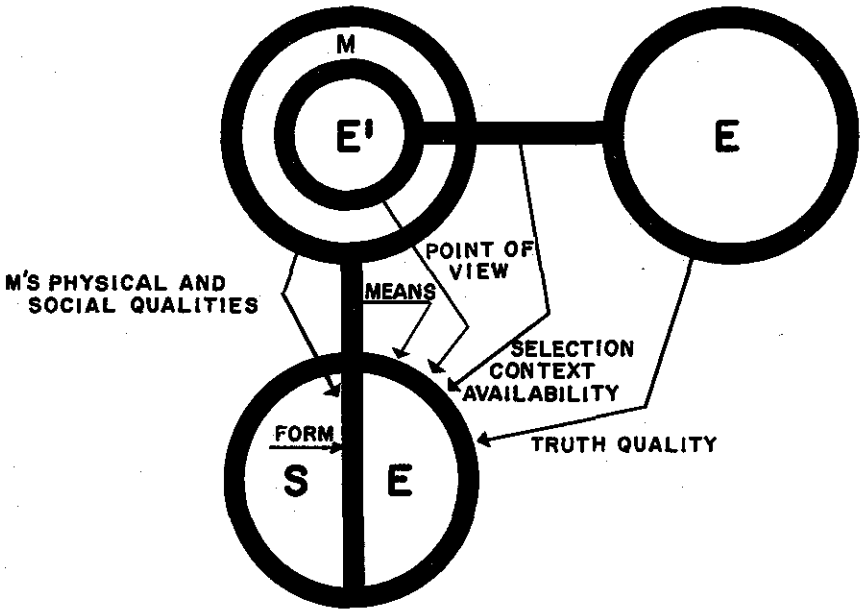

Figure II
Illustration of some of the relationships involved in content analysis

and their world of events? What *points of view* about life and the world as M sees them are implied and facilitated? What social arrangements of ownership and control of communicative *means* and facilities are revealed by the prevalence of this material? What patterns of *selection, context,* and *availability* are inferable from this body of content? How valid, adequate, and coherent is the correspondence of these representations to any actual system of events *(truth quality)?* What might be the *consequences* (aside from sales, likes and dislikes, conventional meanings, or "effective-

ness" in terms of conscious objectives) of social relationships and points of view mediated through this content as a social event system? And so on. Each of these questions represents a way of relating the communication event system to other elements or relationships in the model; some of these can be illustrated on the graphic model as shown in Figure II.

The Role of the Content Analyst

Let us sketch the role of the analyst in our scheme, and contrast it with that in some form-oriented approaches for the purpose of highlighting some distinctions. Systematic classification of units of material into categories for the purpose of description and measurement is a pivotal phase of the analyst's work. Form and conventional-meaning oriented analysis begins with the setting up of units and categories on the basis of explicit signal characteristics. This makes coding and classification a semiclerical task of relatively high face validity and reliability. It places the burden of analysis on design for measurement and on the precision of the means employed for testing the nature and significance of differences.

Consequential meaning-oriented content analysis begins elsewhere and in a different perspective. It begins by defining the position of the analyst in relation to the communication system with which he is to deal.

In terms of our diagram, the analyst may be viewed as communicating agent M_2 whose approach to the communication product SE, as analyst, is different from that of an M_1 producing it, or of an M_2 receiving it, or even from his own casual perceptions. The analyst as scientist must be distinguished from the analyst as subject. This requires the development of some philosophical awareness. As Hans Speier (34) has pointed out, "All theories of the relation between ideas and the world we call social have philosophical implications." The analyst is forced into the philosophical area at least twice. When he formulates his hypotheses, "he in fact formulates a tentative philosophy which provides him with a frame of reference for his research. . . . Again, when he comes to develop generalizations on the basis of his findings, he is taking a philosophical stand." The crucial issue is whether or not he is *aware* of the stand he is taking.

Awareness of one's own stand means that we react to our "naive" perceptions of explicit manifestations in terms of a qualitatively different (more "objective") consciousness. As subjects we laugh when the hapless comic slips on the banana peel; as analysts we react to our own (and other subjects') laughter by tracing our own position (spatial, temporal, cultural, personal) in the exchange with that communication event, and by tracing the social history of the product. Our awareness of the known relationships in these two dimensions (along the horizonal and vertical axes of our model) suggests some of the most pertinent and least apparent questions to ask about unknown relationships in content.

Tentative answers to these questions may be thought of as the hypotheses of the analyst, usually stated in the form of content elements, categories, systematic functional relationships which may escape ordinary scrutiny.

Self-conscious hypothesis-making brings into content analysis a concern with the correctness of the analyst's entire approach to his material, with his philosophical stand, with his appraisal of the process out of which the material emerged—in other words, with the validity of a critical social theory implied in his hypotheses. Few of these hazards—and rewards—confront formal or administrative research in which ultimate goals and values are either given or assumed, and are not at stake in the research.

If the development of hypotheses through a scientific self-consciousness and critical value orientation is the first task of the content analyst, the second is the testing of his inferences through the un-self-conscious method and self-critical temper of science. Here critical, formal, and administrative researchers join in common concern over the development of research design and methodology sensitive to functional relationships of different types.

But before we advocate this union in methodology, it is necessary to explore further some crucial distinctions in aims and scope.

CRITICAL RESEARCH IN MASS COMMUNICATION

Paul Lazarsfeld (24) gave a lucid description of the distinctions between administrative and critical research in communication in an article written in 1941.

During the last two decades, he wrote, the media of mass communication have become some of the best known and best documented spheres of modern society. The reason for the rapid rise of

communications research, he felt, was the notion that modern media of communication are tools handled by people or agencies for given purposes. As the communications investment of these agencies—both commercial and governmental—grew in size, and as the competitive stakes became higher, empirical research was called upon to help make administrative choices in communications strategy and method.

The objection of critical research is not directed against administrative tasks as such, but against limiting the theoretical scope of communications research to the aims which prevail in the majority of current studies, Lazarsfeld wrote. He summarized as a basic notion of critical research the contention that:

> . . . one cannot pursue a single purpose and study the means of its realization isolated from the total historical situation in which such planning and study goes on. Modern media of communication have become such complex instruments that wherever they are used they do much more to people than those who administer them mean to do, and they may have a momentum of their own which leaves the administrative agencies much less choice than they believe they have. The idea of *critical research* is posed against the practice of administrative research, requiring that, prior and in addition to whatever special purpose is to be served, the general role of our media of communication in the present social system is to be studied.

Some Questions and Hypotheses

Lazarsfeld sketched the approach of the critical student. He will ask such questions as: "How are these media organized and controlled? How, in their institutional set-up, is the trend toward centralization, standardization, and promotional pressure expressed? In what form, however disguised, are they threatening human values?" He will feel that the prime task of research is "to uncover the unintentional (for the most part) and often very subtle ways in which these media contribute to living habits and social attitudes. . . ."

Lazarsfeld then indicated some steps in the formation of critical research hypotheses "by visualizing how a student would be trained to make observations in everyday life and to try to interpret them in terms of their social meaning." Note how these examples distinguish the role of the analyst as social scientist from his role as a subject:

> You sit in a movie and look at an old newsreel showing fashions of ten years ago. Many people laugh. Why do those things which we admired just

a little while ago seem so ridiculous now? . . . Could it be that by laughing at past submissions, we gather strength to submit to the present pressure upon us? Thus, what looks to an ordinary observer like an incident in a movie theater, becomes, from this point of view, a symptom of great social significance.

Or you find that a large brewery advertises its beer by showing a man disgustedly throwing aside a newspaper full of European war horrors while the caption says that in times like these the only place to find peace, strength, and courage is at your own fireside drinking beer. What will be the result if symbols referring to such basic human wants as that for peace become falsified into expressions of private comfort and are rendered habitual to millions of magazine readers as merchandising slogans? Why should people settle their social problems by action and sacrifice if they can serve the same ends by drinking a new brand of beer? To the casual observer the advertisement is nothing but a more or less clever sales trick. From the aspect of more critical analysis, it becomes a dangerous sign of what a promotional culture might end up with.

Could it be that the mass-produced portrayal of violent means for their own sake reflects social alienation and facilitates cynicism and apathy; that the "evil scientist" is an image of the hired intellectual, "neutral" in matters of human concern; that, as has been suggested, "Peeping Tomism" is a "form of protest literature in prosperity"; that, as has also been suggested, conventional news values and front pages mirror market-orientation, a loss of historical perspective, and discontinuity of experience harmonious with positivistic science and philosophy? Neither administrative nor purely formal analysis will provide the answers to these and other questions striking at the roots of our uneasiness about popular culture in an age of mass production.

Content and Social Reality

Franklin Fearing (12) expressed this view: "The hypothesis that the mass media reflect value-systems, satisfy needs of society, whether consciously or unconsciously held, furnishes the theoretical basis for extensive research in which the content of films and other mass media are analyzed in order to discover what the value-belief patterns of a given society are." But one cannot fully "discover" value-belief patterns without tracing them to their existential bases in the world of objective events, and without shedding some light on *what* and *whose* needs they really satisfy. Prewar German films, seen as reflecting "not so much explicit credos as psychological disposition—those deep layers of collective mentality which extend

more or less below the dimensions of consciousness" (20), also reflect a system of concrete social and cultural operations which gave rise to Nazism. "Hollywood's Terror Films" can be seen not only in terms of their creating an "all-pervasive fear that threatens the psychic integrity of the average person. . . ." (21) but also in terms of a broader setting in which market-oriented social mechanisms of cultural industry shape this implicit function, and "need" such psychic consequences. In the last analysis no "state of mind" can be fully understood until its "discovery" is driven through to the objective social determinants that produce and require it.

Inner and external reality share common ground in content. Individual and institutional "perceptual frameworks" with their implicit assumptions, need-value systems, experientially and historically developed vantage points, represent one side of the subject-object relation, structured in systematic unity and opposition with the other side—the events talked about, the social circumstances that shape our experience of meanings. Content arises out of the dialectical relation of subject and event. The nature of this relation depends on the realities of man's existence in, and struggle with, society and nature. Implicitly recorded in content, this relation becomes the property of a social event on whose terms the exchange continues.

Science is the penetration of human consciousness into the realities of existence. Content analysis can share in this enterprise through a critical awareness of social processes that shape both communication products and their perceptions and uses. Its hypotheses arise from the background of awareness of prevailing trends in cultural mass production. Specific studies focus on how content systems express these trends, and how they contribute or run counter to them. They culminate in the investigation of the range of implied consequences, in Lazarsfeld's words, "stamping human personalities in modern industrial society . . . , scrutinized from the viewpoint of more or less explicit ideas of what endangers and what preserves the dignity, freedom, and cultural values of human beings."

Education, Mass Media, and the Challenge of Critical Content Analysis

In the analysis of consequential meanings, educational research and content analysis have joint responsibilities. These re-

sponsibilities involve bringing to awareness mechanisms of psychic management masked in righteous overt forms; increasing conscious insight into tensions generated by the exposition of correct "facts" in an implicit structure which serves as an extension of the social process the "facts" purport to illuminate.

World War II Army orientation films come to mind as a fruitful subject for research from that point of view. There is already some evidence suggesting that perhaps the notable "boomerang effect" of some educational material was not so much a "failure" of communication as the implicit communication of built-in relationships superimposed upon formal content, expressing assumptions, points of view, etc., running counter to the explicit message.

A study of the home-front propaganda film, "Don't Be a Sucker" (9), found, for example, that despite the "learning" of specific points by specific target audiences, the majority of the viewers identified with the German Hans rather than with the American Mike. A closer examination of the implicit content of the film revealed under the rather pedantic presentation of an anti-Nazi, pro-tolerance "message," the subtle imprint of a point of view from which fascism appeared dynamic, and democracy an invitation to weakness.

Another anti-bias film entitled "No Way Out" was subjected to searching content analysis (39). It was found that while on the level of verbal argument the film appeared to be a moving document, on a deeper level the producers could not escape the approach of an operationally racist society. The analysts wrote:

> There is of course no doubt of the good intentions of the makers of this film. But in order to show how wrong race hatred is, the film makers had to create a plot and characters and elaborate upon them in detailed images; here their fantasies from a less conscious level come to the surface: the Negro becomes a terrible burden that we must carry on our backs; a sacrifice of white corpses is required for his preservation; the image of the violated white woman forces its way to the screen; and so on. There is an effort to deny these unacknowledged nightmares about the Negro by locating race hatred exclusively in an exceptional, pathological character, but this attempt at denial remains, at bottom, ineffectual. The very title of the film, extremely puzzling in terms of the plot, expresses the basic ambiguity; though the Negro-hater is supposed to be defeated and the falsely accused Negro saved and vindicated, the title seems to state a deeper belief and draw a contrary "moral": there is no way out.

The Payne Fund studies of the early thirties represented the first concerted attack by a group of investigators on broad social

problems involved in cultural mass production. "Perhaps the most important conclusion concerning these data," wrote Edgar Dale (11) in his summary of the content analysis portion of that project, "is the fact that in large measure the characters, the problems, and the settings are removed from the lives of the persons who view [motion pictures]." And perhaps the most significant statement revealing the social implications of the "escapist" trend of overt themes was Dale's conclusion, "The good life is no longer a dream which can only be wished for. We now have at hand the machinery for making it a reality. This machinery for changing our current civilization is not commonly shown in the movies. . . ."

Social Relations in Mass Media Content

In the absence of continuing large-scale investigations the evidence concerning the implicit consequential meanings of mass media content is necessarily fragmentary. Berelson and Salter's (6) analysis of magazine fiction involving minority groups finds, under the overtly egalitarian "messages," the expression of stereotyped relationships and views of life that "serve to activate the predispositions of a hostile or even an indifferent audience." Smythe (34) observes similar implicit patterns in his study of television drama.

Head (17) concludes his study of television drama with the additional observation that as a conserver of the status quo television may be a prime contributor to growing cultural inertia. Lowenthal (26) notes in his study of magazine biographies an emphasis upon the private lives of "idols of consumption," indicating a shift from concern with social problems of production to uniformly individualized pressures of consumption. Implicit class bias is observed in the Bush and Bullock study of "Names in the News" (7); in Sussman's analysis of "Labor in the Radio News" (37); in Auster's "Content Analysis of 'Little Orphan Annie' " (4); and in the Spiegelman, Terwilliger, Fearing research on comic strips (36). An audit (10) of 995 movies reviewed in *Variety* between 1953 and 1957 finds four of the five films dealing with organized labor presenting an unsavory view of unions (with the fifth banned from major theaters across the country).

Hamilton (16) traces the rise of pessimism in widely-circulated Protestant sermons, especially in regard to the solution of social problems. Albig (3) finds similar value judgments implicit

even in the current trend of opinion research, reflecting a "denigration of the average individual, a belaboring of his obvious lack of knowledge and information, and therefore, a skepticism concerning many aspects of political democracy."

Saenger (31) finds the undercurrent of hostility a dominant note in "Male and Female Relations in the American Comic Strip," and suggests the implicit message, "Love is dangerous because it leads to marriage in which . . . men lose their strength." Legman (25) wonders "whether the maniacal fixation on violence and death in all our mass-produced fantasies is a substitution for a censored sexuality, or is, to a greater degree, intended to siphon off—into avenues of perversion opened up by the censorship of sex—the aggression felt by children and adults against the social and economic structure. . . ."

Adorno (1) sees popular music joining in a response "manipulated not only by its promoters, but, as it were, by the inherent nature of the music itself, into a system of response-mechanisms wholly antagonistic to the ideal of individuality in a free, liberal society. . . ." In another connection (2) he writes: "Mass media . . . consist of various layers of meaning superimposed on one another. . . . As a matter of fact, the hidden message may be more important than the overt since this hidden message will escape the controls of consciousness, will not be 'looked through,' will not be warded off by sales resistance, but is likely to sink into the spectator's mind." He finds that the underlying " 'message' of adjustment and unreflecting obedience seems to be dominant and all-pervasive today." His analysis of popular fiction concludes that:

> . . . . The ideals of conformity and conventionalism were inherent in popular novels from the very beginning. Now, however, these ideals have been translated into rather clear-cut prescriptions of what to do and what not to do. . . . True, conflicts of the nineteenth century type—such as women running away from their husbands, the drabness of provincial life, and daily chores—occur frequently in today's magazine stories. However, with a regularity which challenges quantitative treatment, these conflicts are decided in favor of the very same conditions from which these women want to break away. The stories teach their readers that one has to be "realistic," that one has to adjust oneself at any price. . . .

Schramm's (32) quantitative analysis of the "World of the Confession Magazine" substantiates the observation of a punitive, puritanical code hidden in overtly rebellious themes. "It is very interesting," he notes, "to see how 'romance' magazines basically

advise young women to shake the dew out of their eyes and the dreams out of their heads."

Consequential Meaning: From Market Position to Cover Girl

A recent study by the present author (15) attempted to trace the consequential meaning and social role of the "confession" magazine from industrial structure to content and cover design. The social mission of that magazine was found to be determined from the outset by its competitive position in a wage-earning reader market. This circumstance led to the development of an editorial prescription designed for working class women with presumably middle class pocketbooks, anxieties, and "behavior problems."

The social appeal of the "confession" story pivots on the heroine's human frailties in an inhospitable world she cannot fully understand. The "truth" of this world is brought home through an inevitable encounter with sin, crime, suffering, and the final coming to terms (but never to grips) with the stern code of society. In the context of the unyielding hazards and fears of pseudo-middle class life, the heroine's "sinful" acts become irrelevant as acts of protest. The safety valve of individual adjustment and social unrelatedness furnishes the antidote for the social appeal of sympathy for simple human beings facing their brutal world.

The ingredient of unrelatedness seems to be further manifested in the implicit structure of the "confession" cover design. Shaped by both editorial requirements and the pressures of supermarket distribution, the "confession" cover design generally features a wholesome, innocent-looking, radiantly carefree cover girl, wholly unrelated to the fear-and-sin-ridden world of verbal titles surrounding her on the cover.

An experimental study (14) of subject responses to the image of the cover girl seemed to indicate that her unrelated juxtaposition serves well the requirements of the "confession" market and distribution. While the cover girl's involvement with the social issues of her verbal context is outwardly as unconscious as that of the heroine is inwardly unreflecting, her implicit association with the verbal context of the cover safely enhances, as if by contrast, some of the perceived attractions of her image.

The Challenge for Critical Analysis

"The knowledgeable man in the genuine public is able to turn his personal troubles into social issues, to see their relevance for

his community and his community's relevance for them," wrote Mills (29) in comparing the individual in a community of publics with members of audiences created as markets for cultural mass production. "The individual," he wrote,

> understands that what he thinks and feels as personal troubles are very often not only that but problems shared by others and indeed not subject to solution by one individual but only by modifications of the structure of the groups in which he lives and sometimes the structure of the entire society.
>
> Men in masses are gripped by personal troubles, but they are not aware of their true meaning and source. Men in public confront issues, and they are aware of their terms. It is the task of the liberal institution, as of liberally educated man, continually to translate troubles into issues and issues into the terms of their human meaning for the individual. . . .

The case for self-government is predicated upon a community of publics. The dissolution of publics into markets for mass media conceived and conducted in the increasingly demanding framework of commodity merchandising is the cultural (and political) specter of our age. This fear is now joined by a growing concern over the trend of social science research, especially in the field of communications. More and more of this research is seen to succumb to the fate of mass media content itself in being implicitly tailored to the specifications of industrial and market operations. Concern "with questions of ethics in relation to the formation and effects of public opinion," wrote William Albig (3) in his review of the research of two decades, ". . . was largely absent, or at least unexpressed, in the writings of . . . contributors to opinion research in the past 20 years." Albig continued:

> Since 1920 a large professional class has developed to man the expanding activities of press, film, radio, television. At the same time, commercial and academic analysts of the communication process have proliferated. To a marked extent these professionals discuss this vast communications activity in terms of process, technique, stimuli, impact, effects, and semantic analysis, but not in terms of the ethical and value problems of communications content and effect.

It is, then, in this context of fragmentary evidence about the consequential meaning of mass media content, and of growing public and professional concern about its implications for a community of publics (including social scientists) that the challenge emerges. The challenge for mass communications research is this: to combine the empirical methods with the critical aims of social science, to join rigorous practice with value-conscious theory, and thus to gather the insight the knowledgeable individual in a genuine

public must have if he is to come to grips (and not unconsciously to terms) with the sweeping undercurrents of his culture.

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