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16th May 1974

Professor George Gerbner,
Dean, The Annenberg School of Communications,
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3620 Walnut Street C5,
Philadelphia PA 19174, U.S.A.

Dear George,

Thank you for your letter of April 19th and for enclosing an edited copy of my lecture for an article in the Journal. I return it as it stands. This is fine. Please go ahead and do as you think fit. Thank you.

You mention in your letter that you enclose a Table of Contents for the Spring issue and a copy of the current list of books available for review. Unfortunately these were not enclosed. Do you think you could let me have them please?

I enclose a copy of a paper I gave at a recent seminar. I think it has one or two new ideas and subject to one or two alterations (taking it out of the conference context) I thought you might like to consider it for inclusion in the Journal. In any case I would be pleased to have your comments.

I hope you are coming to Leipzig. It promises to be well worthwhile.

Regards,

Yours sincerely,

(James D. Halloran)
Professor & Director.

Encl:

See article on CIA - evidence on V-Victim - few of UK - Olm 27 power - Unofficial report

mailed 5/28/74

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COUNCIL OF EUROPE

CONSEIL DE L'EUROPE

COMMITTEE FOR OUT-OF-SCHOOL EDUCATION
AND CULTURAL DEVELOPMENT

A Colloquy
organized with the collaboration of
The Centre for Mass Communication Research
University of Leicester

"Training in the Critical Reading of Televisual Language"

The implications of media research
for Cultural Policies

(Leicester, 27-28 September, 1973)

UNDERSTANDING TELEVISION
SOME COMMENTS ON THE ROLE OF MASS COMMUNICATION RESEARCH

Professor James D Halloran
Director
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UNDERSTANDING TELEVISION

In the memorandum which he prepared for this Colloquy, Paoli Terni makes two main points. First he reminds us that the way our communication systems are organized and currently operate is not conducive to freedom of cultural expression and, secondly, he draws our attention to some more concrete and specific problems about understanding television language.

At first sight these might appear to be two quite separate and unrelated points. The compartmentalized way in which communication studies have developed makes it unlikely that anyone whose main area of study is communication institutions or systems would find himself at the same conference as someone whose prime concern is television language. Terni, however, suggests that the two could be interrelated, and in this introductory paper I would like to develop this idea and suggest a few areas that we might further explore during the Colloquy.

In general, the theme will be that "understanding television language" is best seen in the wider social context of "understanding television in society". This is particularly true as far as this committee of the Council of Europe is concerned, for its terms of reference centres on cultural development and cultural policies.

The report from the first Colloquy at Lausanne in June 1972 on this same subject indicates that one of the questions discussed was "How can those who watch the programme get the message?" This ought not to surprise us, for communicators and pedagogues have been asking this sort of question about some form of communication or other for a long time - long before "the language of television" became a topic for discussion and research. What is surprising, perhaps, is that on the whole the discussion on television language and "understanding the message" does not have much to say about the origin, production and presentation of the message, and rarely includes such questions as Is the message worth understanding? Who wants who to understand it? Why do they want it to be understood? What happens when it is understood? - and so on. Moreover, it is often not very clear what is really meant by understanding. What do we really mean in concrete terms when we say that a message has or has not been understood?

It is unlikely in our discussions at this Colloquy that we shall want to ignore content and take the message as given. We shall probably want to take into account the factors that govern the encoding of the message, and the relationship between these factors and the factors that surround the decoding process. The word "coding" is deliberately used here in a very wide sense to cover all factors that impinge on the production and utilization processes. It is particularly important that we should not divorce the message from its source.

Generally throughout Europe television serves the nation state, whatever the politics of the state. The television institution tends to be centralized, monopolistic, and engages in one-way communication with a heterogeneous, fragmented audience to whom there is little accountability. On the one side there are the broadcasters with their professional ideologies, occupational routines, and self-protecting mythologies, who have been socialized into a profession within given socio-economic systems. These professionals select, process and present the message. On the other side, there are individuals who make-up the non-participating audiences and who receive the messages in relative isolation. It is seen by many as an elitist, literary set-up where a small group of educated, articulate people - who more or less share the same codes of the dominant culture - encode messages for consumption by others who have different codes. The reception of the message may be influenced by standardized formulae which have been inherited from the producers, but generally the receiver will not be in a position to recognize all the professional rules and practices.

When the decoding does not coincide with the encoding it is customary to describe this in terms of misunderstanding, failure to understand, or aberration. It is assumed that there is something wrong with the decoding and research is often carried out on this assumption apparently with a view to correcting the mistakes - and perhaps even with the hope that the deviants may be converted to a superior code. It is worth mentioning in this connection that in certain cases we (researchers, social scientists, scholars, etc.) probably share the same codes and approaches as the broadcasters. This could be true both in terms of our own "understandings" and, more importantly for our purpose here, in terms of the way we operationalize our research. We may not find it difficult to accept that one group perceives a message in a different way from another group, and that one or both of these groups perceives a message in a different way from those who produce it. However, we may not be as ready to accept that the results of research merely reflect another set of perceptions and that meanings superimposed on messages in content analysis represent little more than selective perceptions, statistically dressed up and systematically presented to give the appearance of real meanings. We might bear in mind this possibility when we examine some of the approaches to content analysis.

Results from several research projects on comprehension from different countries in Europe suggest that television news is not well "understood", and that many people appear not to understand even the most elementary concepts used in news bulletins. One explanation of this in terms of the existence of different codes has just been mentioned and more will be said about this later. However, we cannot leave this point without posing questions about the validity of these research results and about the overall research approach to understanding or comprehending television messages.

In this type of research it is not always clear what is meant by "understanding". The customary comprehension tests seem to have more to do with memory, retention or recall than with understanding and, of course, most of the tests depend on the ability of the subjects to verbalize.

That there is a difference between understanding and the ability to verbalize often seems to be ignored. At times one almost gets the impression that there is an assumption underlying the research that nothing has happened if it can't be verbalized. Sometimes the subjects are expected to verbalize in specified forms at set times and in certain conditions, what they have experienced from a medium that is primarily visual.

We know from other research that we can learn from television in all sorts of ways. We can learn something, act on it, use it, apply it, be influenced by it, perhaps even understand it - and still not be able to verbalize it. Anyone who has done any research on or observed the conversation of, say, a group of working men in pubs or in clubs knows that these men often have quite subtle understandings and appreciations of power, economic and authority relationships in our society, and that this is particularly true where these touch on their own personal lives. Yet it is quite likely that these men would not obtain a high score on the formal knowledge/information questions so frequently used by researchers who would claim to be tapping "understanding".

Once, whilst carrying out participation observation in a television newsroom, I noticed that every day the first task of one of the senior staff was to read as many newspapers as were available. Had I given this man a "comprehension test" shortly after he had completed his reading I do not think he would have done very well, yet his "understanding" was such that throughout the day, given appropriate cues, he could recall and apply what he had read to the wide range of topics that came up for discussion in the preparation of the daily news bulletin.

We can say then that there are some people who may grasp the meaning of messages but who have not the verbal competence to translate or to code them appropriately, (in other words, there are things that can be verbalized by some and not by others); that there are also things that would appear to have been understood that cannot be verbalized in certain situations or in the absence of cues (i.e. artificial research situation), and that there are also "understandings" that cannot be verbalized at all. If research on understanding has to depend on verbalization, then the results from such research are not likely to be very useful.

Leaving aside the research problems for the time being, and assuming that we could work out some agreement on concepts, it seems possible that when we say that someone has not understood the message, we could be dealing with several different phenomena.

First there is the person who has understood the message but is unable to verbalize it; then there is the person who does not understand because, for example, he does not know the words that have been used; thirdly there is the person who is in a position to understand (he shares a field of experience or at least part of it with the communicator) but misinterprets or wrongly applies the words because of an imperfect knowledge of the code; and finally there is the person who does not share the same field of experience as the communicator, his thoughts and feelings are segmented in a different way, therefore the word which he receives

will be applied to an experience which is not the same as the one the communicator had in mind.*

All these four cases could be the subject of research projects. The second and third would probably lead to projects which need not vary a great deal from previous work in this area. Broadly speaking they pose "educational" questions and could be approached in conventional ways. The final case, however, is perhaps the most interesting, for it calls for a close examination of how people in different cultures and sub-cultures categorize their experience in different ways, how objects and experience are given or take on different meanings, and how thoughts, feelings and communication are influenced accordingly.

Obviously it is not that there is nothing in common or that there is no overlap whatsoever between the two cultures. The primary codes could be the same in both cultures (a cow is an animal), but at a higher level there could be differences in the sub-codes (a cow is sacred) where the objects are organized in a different way. There could be "understanding" then between the two cultures at one level, but not at the other where different connotations apply. It is worth noting also that this type of analysis could be extended to cover style and genre.

The examples given above are gross and obvious, and the real task for the mass communication researcher is much more subtle and difficult. His first task might be to identify and map out the different sub-cultures, and ascertain the significance of the various sub-codes in selected areas governed by specific broadcasting or cultural policies. There are, of course, important international aspects to this problem as well.

In most societies, however, this task of identification and mapping out is a difficult one, for the sub-cultural boundaries are by no means clearly marked out. Moreover, the sub-codes of those in the sub-culture are not immune from mass media influence. They could include a kind of standardized imprint, certain aspects of the predominant culture, which the mass media have made generally available.

The television message, then (it is accepted that the terms used here are quite inadequate), is not so much a message as this term is normally used for it is more like a message vehicle containing several messages which take on meanings in terms of the available codes or sub-codes. We need to know the potential of each vehicle with regard to all the relevant sub-cultures.+

* See the work of Eco, Fabbri and Hjelmster, for a much fuller discussion on these and related points.

+ For the sake of simplicity this paper is mainly couched in information or meaning terms. The whole approach could, of course, be extended to cover other uses.

George Gerbner approaches the general problem from a different angle. In his attempt to understand the message (in this case the message of television drama in the USA), Gerbner suggests that the mass media cultivate public conceptions on the level of implicit values, premises, priorities and definitions of issues and relationships rather than on the level of general verbalizations, global interpretations, and explicit conclusions. He maintains that people may share certain assumptions whether or not they agree on specific views, and he sees the ground upon which the assumptions rest as being relatively independent of individual and group differences.

According to this view, the basic common message of television drama is to set the agendas and define issues and situations which, although not determining the outcome of all decisions, in the long run have a systematic and decisive influence on most decisions.

Pictures and premises about the world and its people, the rules of the game (not necessarily made overt or manifest, but implicit in the way things are presented), are cultivated in our minds through regular and repetitive portrayals. The same premises may lend themselves to a range of conclusions, but the range of conclusions is held together by the definitions implicit in the premises.

Our task here, according to Gerbner, is to understand what has been "released into the public consciousness", for he holds that the message systems form the bonds of a national community structure, the perspectives that unite and the issues that divide that community, shape the relationships of its component parts to each other, and affect the bearing of the whole on public policy.

It could be argued that Gerbner claims too much both for the power and influence of television and for his own methods of content analysis. Does any method of content analysis, by itself, allow us to make statements about what has been absorbed, what has been released into the public consciousness? Gerbner starts with content, with the message, which he maintains must be investigated on its own terms before we attempt to find out what it might cultivate in the population in social conceptions and behaviour. But this approach, starting from content in this way, could possibly skew the cultivation or uses study so that it would follow only those leads which had emerged from the content analysis. This could be restrictive, tautological and self-justifying. There are, of course, those who would argue that in any case, particularly as far as programme policy is concerned, what matters is not what is actually there, or whatever content analysis says is there, but what the audience perceives and how the audience uses what is made available.

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As far as research tasks are concerned, there might be more point to a detailed and expensive study of content if it were more embracing, covering news, current affairs etc., as well as drama, and if the project were more comprehensively designed to cover the whole mass communications process, including production of the message and all the factors that impinge on the production process.

We need not pursue these points further in an agenda-setting paper such as this, and we must now ask other important questions about why we want to know more about understanding the message and what we might do with the knowledge if and when we obtain it.

It is necessary to ask this "why do we want to know" question because so often many of those who work in this field give the impression that they are thinking, if not in terms of indoctrination, at least in terms of influence, conversion to a higher plane, "how can we pass on things that we know to be good things", and so on. There are many who want to know about the process of communication, perceptions and understanding because they want to change people. Educational and commercial research is often carried out with this in view. Obviously, if we understand what others understand we are in a better position to make sure that they understand what we understand.

However, hopefully, it need not be like this, for to understand what others understand can be very illuminating and could form - in fact ought to form - the base for communication and cultural policies.

Ideally research would not be looking for information which would make it easier for those who want to convert (although it could be used in this way) but would aim to bring to light and to discuss the codes, the perceptions, the interpretations and the uses which characterize the various cultures.

Our research, then, would not be geared to correcting the aberrations and converting the audience to the dominant linguistic and cultural norms, no matter how desirable we may think these are. We might first of all try to identify and map out the different coding and usage patterns in our society, and to look at the relationships between use and provision. This should enable us to see what people are getting from what has been made available to them, and we would then be in a position to say something about how social and communication needs were being met by existing media structures. Recommendations about necessary changes could follow. But "need" is a difficult concept - far easier to preach about than to identify or specify. What are the communication needs of society? In this paper references have been made to media structures as well as broadcasting structures. Social structure might also be mentioned, for if we are concerned with cultural policies we cannot afford to study the media in isolation and as if they were unrelated to other institutions in society.

I think we can safely assume, together with my colleague Philip Elliott who has written about this elsewhere, that mass communication is a contradiction in terms and that, granted existing structures and the nature of most societies in Europe, it is impossible to communicate effectively to large groups. It is often argued that both communication and size and "quality of content" and ease of communication are inversely related, and that the inevitable result of making things easier to communicate is that there will be less to communicate. Are we content to accept with

Lee Thayer that if everybody is to talk to everybody, it is bound to be about nothing much?

These sorts of wide-ranging questions are obviously an integral part of the debate on cultural policies and, equally obviously, they have implications for institutions other than media institutions. It is not proposed to answer them here but they are important questions and they can be and have been answered in diametrically opposed ways. The different answers may be seen as reflecting fundamentally opposed views on cultural policies.

However, one should not conclude without a few remarks about possible changes in the structure and organization of television as most of us now know it. Television, as it is currently organized in most European countries, tends to maintain - perhaps even multiply - the power of a small, relatively well-educated, élitist group. Admittedly, the debate on the future of television has widened a little and now includes such questions as accountability, access, wider participation, and so on. Staff recruitment may be more broadly based than it used to be, "access" programmes may have been introduced albeit at inaccessible times, minority groups invited to participate, and so on. In some ways things have changed, but have the changes really made any difference to basic communication problems?

In England local radio, scarcely noted for its radical impact, is being followed by experiments with community cable television. On the surface it might be thought that this development promises more in the way of real change. But local television is small scale, operates on shoestring budgets, and has to compete with the major networks. Moreover, even when local television makes it possible for a simplified television technology to be made available to "extra station people", these people still tend to be members of the dominant culture. Perhaps, then, we should be asking for a new system, an altogether new structure, with far-ranging participation at all levels, rather than pretending that we are making moves in the right direction by playing about with a slightly different local version of the old system.

We must be prepared to consider the possibility that radical restructuring is not just a matter of access and increased worker participation, but that it might also call for basic changes in existing media structures. Of course, access and participation are important. But perhaps one of our most important tasks as researchers is to investigate the possibility of whether the basic relationship between communicator and receiver can be changed, for this relationship is at the heart of the whole matter. Must it always be the select few talking to the many?

We should look into the question of developing a two-way flow - not just "feedback", not just the answering of questions put by the professionals, but the possibility of facilitating genuine dialogue. This might also be accompanied by a change in traditional viewing situations which might counter the prevailing audience fragmentation. As Galtung has suggested, television might be viewed in "collective" situations outside the family, at least for part of the time. Research shows that the viewing situation is an important influence in filtering the message. Who knows what might result from more communal viewing (not mass viewing) which would make it possible for us to see how others react in front of the screen, as well as facilitating communal exchanges about the television message.

The terms of reference of this Colloquy are so broad that it is impossible in an introductory paper such as this to do more than suggest a few of the areas that might be investigated. Participants may wish to raise other topics not mentioned in this paper but which would still fall within the terms of the reference.

The important thing to remember is that governments and media institutions are regularly taking decisions about media and cultural policies which have enormous implications for the cultural lives of millions of people both in their own and other countries. These decisions are not normally well-informed and only rarely are they thought of in terms of cultural policy. In fact "cultural policy" or, for that matter "broadcasting policy" are not terms in common use. Generally there is no conscious policy. The decisions tend to be based not so much on deliberate policy considerations, still less on social needs, but on vested interests, political expediency and the needs of existing institutions.

Perhaps during this Colloquy we might discuss the crucial areas of cultural policy and ask how our research can be made more relevant and fruitful. But it is not just enough to draw up yet another inventory of what we need to know. We must also address ourselves to the practical problems of being allowed to find out, and of making sure that the results of our research reach and influence the decision-makers. We still have a great deal to learn about communicating about communication, and it is to be hoped that our experience at the Colloquy will help us in this connection also.
