

CERTAIN MEDIA BIASES

In the Spring of this year, an interdisciplinary seminar on Culture and Communication from the departments of Anthropology, English, Political Economy, Psychology and Town Planning at the University of Toronto, conducted the following experiment in cooperation with the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation:

One hundred and thirty-six students from the Second Year General Course, on the basis of their over-all academic standing of the previous year, were divided into four equal groups who either (1) heard and saw a lecture delivered in a television studio, (2) heard and saw this same lecture on a television screen, (3) heard it over the radio, or (4) read it in manuscript. Thus there were, in the CBC studios, four controlled groups who simultaneously received a single lecture and then immediately wrote an identical examination to test both understanding and retention of content. Later the experiment was repeated, using three similar groups from the Second Year General Course. This time the same lecture was (1) delivered in a classroom, (2) presented as a film in a small theatre (using the television kinescope of the first lecture), and (3) again read in manuscript. The actual mechanics of the experiment were relatively simple, but the problem of writing the script for the lecture lead us to a

consideration of the different resources and limitations of various dramatic forms.

It immediately became apparent that no matter how the script was written and the show produced, it would be slanted in various ways for and against each of the media involved; no show could be produced which did not contain these biases, and the only real common denominator would be the simultaneity of presentation. It was decided not to exploit the full resources of any one medium, but to try to chart a middle-of-the-road course between all of them. In short, the show was to be equally adapted for each of the media, or more accurately, to belong to none of them. The alternative, of taking a single theme and writing a separate show for each medium, we plan to attempt at a later date.

The lecture which was finally produced dealt with linguistic codifications of reality and metaphysical concepts underlying grammatical systems. It was chosen because it concerned a field in which few of any students could be expected to have prior knowledge, and moreover it offered opportunities for the use of body movements, especially hand gestures. The cameras moved throughout the lecture, and close-ups were taken when facial expressions and hand movements were particularly relevant. No other visual *aids* were used, nor were shots taken of the audience while the lecture was in progress. Instead, the cameras simply focused on the speaker for twenty-seven minutes.

Now an audience can give their attention to a man actually speaking to them for that length of time; but to look at the static picture of the same man for twenty-seven minutes would be an intolerable strain. So the cameras never stood still. It then became the problem of the television producer to decide at what point on the screen, at every minute, the eyes of the audience were to be directed. The audience was, in fact, looking at the picture—though they did not realize it—through the eyes of the producer. They saw what he made the cameras see. The experience was thus filtered first through his mind, and that part of it which he controlled, he structured. The greater his success in organizing it, the greater was the audience's illusion of being eye-witnesses of an event actually taking place. Frequent discussions therefore were held with the producer, Mr. Sydney Newman, in which we accepted nearly all of his suggestions, with one exception. That exception arose from the fact that his first concern was to produce the best possible television show, but the one we envisaged, and which was actually produced, sacrificed some of the resources of television in order to remain as neutral as possible. We are especially grateful to Mr. Newman for letting us experiment in this way, particularly since, had the show been a failure, he would have been held responsible.

DRAMATIC FORMS AND THEIR BIASES

The first difference we found between a classroom and a television lecture was the brevity of the latter. The classroom lecture, if not ideally, at least in practice, sets a slower pace. It is verbose and repetitive; it allows for greater elaboration and permits the lecturer to take up several *related* points. The television show, however, is stripped right down; there is less time for qualifications or alternative interpretations, and only time enough for *one* point. (Into twenty-seven minutes we put the meat of a two-hour classroom lecture.) The ideal television speaker states his point and then brings out different facets of it by a variety of illustrations. But the classroom lecturer is less subtle and, to the agony of the better students, explicitly repeats and repeats his identical points in the hope that ultimately no student will miss them.

The next major difference noted was the abstracting role of television—Selectivity in print and radio are obvious enough, but we are less conscious of it in television, perhaps because of television's greater realism.'

As in a movie theatre, only the screen is illuminated, and on it, only points of immediate relevance are portrayed; everything else is eliminated. Moreover, it is important that what you see not detract from what you hear, and vice versa. Sight and sound are not merely coordinated here; they become a single, unique language which proceeds at a different pace than radio. This became apparent first when the script, timed for radio, proved a fifth too long for television; another script might have been too short. Similarly, what was satisfactory over television sounded slow and disjointed over radio. Dr. Birdwhistell's article makes clear why this was so: each employs a separate language—one purely oral, the other verbal and kinesic, combined with situational data. The use of visual aids and body movements on television not only makes possible the elimination of certain words, but requires a unique script. The ideal radio broadcast, on the other hand, is written otherwise and delivery stresses pitch and intonation to make up for the absence of visual data. That flat, broken speech in 'sidewalk interviews' is the speech of a person untrained in radio delivery.

Television is designed for an audience of two or three; film for a crowd. The drive-in theatre leaves one with a feeling of isolation, of lacking the anonymity and passivity one associates with cinema. Moreover, the timing, particularly for jokes, is too slow.

IL and G. L. Lang (*American Sociological Review*, 18:1) contrast the recorded experience of thirty-one participant observers who watched the 'MacArthur Day' parade in Chicago with the picture of this event given over television. The general impression on the screen was of a landslide effect of national indignation at MacArthur's abrupt dismissal that bordered on mass hysteria. This effect was achieved by editing the visual field and by a commentary that bore little relation to observable fact. Here, as in all the new media, *the dramatic* was not only stressed but in a sense, created.

In one sense, television is more intimate than a lecture delivered to a large audience. The cameras lead the spectator from a total view to a close-up, and back again, creating a dynamic picture. And the speaker appears to be looking at, and speaking directly to, the individual listener; even when he turns to one side or looks down, he does so as if in personal conversation with the listener. In this experiment it proved necessary to eliminate the results of the studio group for several reasons, the most

important of which concerned this point. In the studio the lecturer was forced to address the cameras and thus to ignore the students. He was on a raised platform and literally spoke over their heads. Some of the students, in an effort to establish contact with him, turned in their seats and watched the show on a monitor set in the studio.

Face-to-face discourse is not as selective as television; it comes closer to communicating an unabridged situation than any other medium and involves the direct give and take of a dynamic relationship. Of course, there can be personal involvement in the other media. When Richardson's *Pamela* was serialized in 1741, it aroused such interest that in one English town, upon receipt of the last installment, the church bell announced that virtue had been rewarded. Radio stations have reported receiving quantities of baby clothes and bassinets when, in a soap opera, a heroine had a baby. BBC and *News Chronicle* report cases of women viewers who kneel before their television sets to kiss male announcers good night. However, only in personal conversation is there genuine participation and satisfactory reciprocity. Whether this means it's more convincing, I do not know.

I was recently told a story about a Polish couple who, though long resident in Toronto, retained many of the customs of their homeland. Their son despaired of ever getting his father to buy a suit cut in style or of the mother ever taking an interest in Canadian life. Then he bought them a television set and in a matter of months a major change took place. One evening the mother remarked that 'Edith Piaf is the latest thing on Broadway' and the father appeared in 'the kind of suit executives wear on television'. For years the father had passed this same suit in store windows and seen it both in advertisements and on living men, but not until he saw it on television did it become meaningful I think this same statement goes for all media: each offers a unique presentation of reality which when new has a freshness and clarity that is extraordinarily powerful.

When T. S. Eliot adapted *Murder in the Cathedral* for film, he noted a difference in realism between cinema and stage:

The first and most obvious difference, I found, was that the cinema

(even where fantasy is introduced) is much more realistic than the stage. Especially in an historical picture, the setting, the costume, and the way of life represented have to be accurate. Even a minor anachronism is intolerable. On the stage much can be overlooked or forgiven; and indeed, an excessive care for accuracy of historical detail can become burdensome and distracting. In watching a stage performance, the member of the audience is in direct contact with the actor, is always conscious that he is looking at a stage and listening to an actor playing a part. In looking at a film, we are much more passive; as audience, we contribute less. We are seized with the illusion that we are observing an actual event, or at least a series of photographs of the actual event; and nothing must be allowed to break this illusion. Hence the precise attention to detail. . . .

Eliot is referring to *visual* realism, not subject matter. All the characters in *The Loon's Necklace*, for example, are Northwest Coast Indian masks. This is pure cinema; it could only be done on film. It stresses fantasy by exploiting that which is unique to film.

I doubt if the same can be said of television. Just what television is, is hard to say; it has yet to find itself and today fills in with older media: movies, plays, puppet shows, forums, lectures. But one unique and obvious feature is its realistic drama. The attractive feature of televised political conventions and investigations comes in part from the fact that cameras do not focus on speakers, but on persons spoken to or about; the audience *hears* the accuser but *watches* the accused. They watch the trembling hands of the big-town crook. This is real drama, in process, with the outcome uncertain. Books and movies can only pretend uncertainty, but television captures this vital aspect of experience. Seen on television, the fire in the 1952 Democratic Convention threatened briefly to become a conflagration; seen on a newsreel, it was history, without potentiality.

Precisely because the other media differ from television in both approach and content, the absence of this element of uncertainty is not necessarily a handicap to them. Thus it is clear from the beginning that Hamlet is a doomed man, but far from detracting in interest, this heightens the sense of tragedy.

Now one of the results of the time-space duality which developed in Western culture from the Renaissance on, was a separation within the arts. Music, which created symbols in time, and graphic art, which created symbols in space, became separate pursuits, and men gifted in one rarely pursued the other. Dance and ritual, which inherently com-

bined them, fell in popularity. Only in drama did they remain united. It is significant that of the four new media, the three most recent are essentially dramatic media, particularly television which combines music and art, language and gesture, rhetoric and colour. They convey emotional tones, not merely 'information'. They do not, however, exercise the same freedom with time that the stage practices. An intricate plot, employing flash-backs, multiple perspective, and overlays, intelligible on the stage, might be completely mystifying on the screen. The audience has no time to think back, to establish relations between early hints and subsequent discoveries. The picture passes before the eyes too quickly; and there are no intervals in which to take stock of what has happened, and make conjectures of what is going to happen. The observer is in a more passive state, less interested in subtleties. Both television and film are nearer to narrative and depend much more upon the episodic. An intricate time construction can be done visually, but in fact rarely is. On stage Ophelia's death is described by three separate groups: one hears the announcement and watches the reactions simultaneously. On film the camera shows her drowned where 'a willow lies aslant a brook'.

It became apparent from differences such as these, that it *was* not simply a question of communicating a single idea over various media, but that a given type of idea or insight belongs primarily, though not exclusively, to one medium, and that it can be gained or communicated best through that medium.

Thus the format of the book favours lineal expression, for the argument runs like a thread from cover to cover: subject to verb to object, sentence to sentence, paragraph to paragraph, chapter to chapter, carefully structured from beginning to end. This is not true of drama, at least good drama, nor of good literature generally, which has always employed multi-perspective, but it is true of most books, particularly texts, histories, legal briefs and autobiographies. Events are arranged chronologically and hence, it is assumed, causally; relationship, not being, is valued. The book is ideally suited for discussing, say, evolution.

But the form of the new mass media favours discontinuity, not lineality. The newspaper format offers short, discreet articles which give important facts first and then taper off to incidental details which may, and often are, eliminated by the make-up man. The fact that reporters cannot control the length of articles means that in writing them, emphasis cannot be placed on structure, at least in the traditional sense, with the climax or conclusion at the end. The position and size of articles on the front page is determined by interest and importance, not content. Unrelated reports from Moscow, Sarawak, London and Ittipuk are juxtaposed;

time and space are destroyed and the *here* and the *now* are presented

as a single gestalt. Such a format lends itself to simultaneity, not chronology or lineality. Items abstracted from a total situation are not arranged in causal sequence, but presented in association, as raw experience. Much the same may be said of the other new media. Both radio and television offer short, unrelated programs, interrupted between and within by commercials. I say Interrupted, being myself an anachronism of **book** culture, but my children do not regard commercials as interruptions, as breaking continuity. They regard them rather as parts of a whole, and their reaction is neither one of annoyance nor indifference. The ideal news-broadcast has half a dozen speakers report from as many parts of the world on as many subjects.

In magazines, where a writer more frequently controls the length of his article, he can, if he wishes, organize it in the traditional style, but the majority do not. Moreover, the format as a whole opposes lineality. In Life, extremes are juxtaposed: space ships and prehistoric monsters, Flemish monasteries and dope addicts. This variety creates a sense of speed and urgency. One encounters, within a few pages, a riot in Teheran, a Hollywood marriage, the wonders of the Eisenhower administration, a two-headed calf, and a party on Jones beach, all sandwiched between advertisements. The eye takes in the page as a whole (readers may pretend this isn't so, but the success of advertising suggests it is), and the page—perhaps the whole magazine—becomes a single gestalt where association, though not causal, is often life-like.

In this rapid change in Western culture from an emphasis upon lineality to a presentation which is essentially magical—I use the word with explicit meaning—the new *mass* media have played a central **role**. Certainly in format they are attuned to non-lineal presentation, and some of the older media are being modified to fit it.

The role of museums is a case in point. Archeological and natural history museums came into existence in the second half of the 19th century to teach evolution. Ancient tools, for example, were arranged in unilinear sequence with the simplest, and allegedly oldest, at the bottom and the most complex at the top. Here was evidence that every layman could see and understand, more convincing than anything described in print. But after the argument had been won, and when doubts about the unilinear nature of evolution developed, this display technique was abandoned. For a while displays were built around themes (generally ones which dealt with production and distribution of commodities), but in spite of the enthusiasm with which such renovation was undertaken, it awakened little public interest. The solution lay, directors found, in turn-

high museums into art cathedrals. The ideal museum was divided into two separate units: one for display, the other for laboratories and study collections. A gallery with a vaulted ceiling, light walls, a large, central statue of Buddha illuminated by shafts of descending light and surrounded by a few outstanding and artistically displayed pieces (often in the open and with only brief labels)—this was the type of gallery which brought crowds back into museums. Emphasis had shifted from relationship to being.

We were advised, when setting up this experiment, that television, being new and exciting, would command greater audience attention now than it might in later years. I think this is true. But print, the oldest mass medium, also enjoys an advantage: prestige. And the newer media are slighted, particularly in academic circles.

Dr. Chaytor's article on psychological differences between speech and print shows that each is a unique medium, and that print is not simply the visual recording of speech. Pitch and intonation are left to phrasing and punctuation; body movements are inferred or ignored; etc.¹ Edmund M. Morgan, Harvard Law Professor, writes:

One who forms his opinion from the reading of any record alone is prone to err, because the printed page fails to produce the impression or convey the idea which the spoken word produced or conveyed. The writer has read charges to the jury which he had previously heard delivered, and has been amazed to see an oral deliverance which indicated a strong bias appear on the printed page as an ideally impartial exposition. He has seen an appellate court solemnly declare the testimony of a witness to be especially clear and convincing which the trial judge had orally characterized as the most abject perjury.

Technically, print leaves much to be desired as a communication form. Yet the remarkable thing is the achievements made with it, particularly in book form. Indeed, the influence of the book has been so great, that its limitations and resources have become, to a surprising degree, the limitations and resources of Western thought. This is particularly true of a university audience. Rigid verbal grammar, a product of literacy, is valued; rhetoric and gestures are avoided and left to unlettered evangelists, politicians and salesmen; the non-linear argument is distrusted.

1. N. Stanton (*The Journal of Applied Psychology*, 1934; summarized in *Sponsor*, 8:7) performed experiments with 180 students to determine which mode of transmitting fictitious advertising copy was more effective: print or radio. The oral copy was presented by loudspeaker without a program—no music or dialogue; the printed material, identical in content, was given without illustrations or display type. Two groups of eight ads each were used for both. Then the students were given ream, aided recall and recognition tests one day, seven days and twenty-one days after exposure for correct trade-name association. In all three tests for all three periods, the auditory method proved superior. When we consider that the college student is a trained reader, such an experiment with other persons may even show a greater difference in favor of audition for certain economic levels.

It is not print which academics respect, but the book format with its bias toward linearity. Newspapers and magazines they regard as entertainment forms. But the book is associated with the Bible, culture, scholarship, law, science. It was the one means in the 19th century by which a poor man, cut off from the conversation of the leisure class, could become self-educated. Its relative permanence gives it an air of immortality: the written word embalming truth for posterity. Recently when it became apparent that populations such as India's might by-pass literacy and go directly to television, some academics were appalled; their reaction was reminiscent of that of the Russians in the United Nations who protested that Stone Age Melanesians would have to go first through the Bronze and Iron ages before they could accept modern civilization.

Our very concepts of mind and truth have, until recently, been inseparably associated with that portion of reality best communicated by print. *Coca Cola can make any claim* it wishes *pictorially*, but what it says in print must conform with Federal law. Whether this means that print, precisely because it is taken seriously and critically examined, is therefore more effective, I do not know.

Print enjoys an intrinsic advantage of greater importance: the reader controls exposure. He reads when he pleases, pauses when he wishes, and repeats or skips sections at will. Of all the advantages enjoyed by each of the media, I think this is the most significant.

THE SCRIPT

The script was re-written five times in an effort to achieve an approximate neutrality. In subject, it was probably more at home in print and the classroom than in any of the other media. Over television, it reminded one correspondent of a BBC play, done in the original Greek, so **nothing** would be lost in translation. It was timed for television, proved too slow for radio, but satisfactory for film and classroom. It was not written in a lineal fashion with an introduction, statement of problem, analysis running from point to point and finally a conclusion, but, like a modern advertisement, took a single idea, stated it immediately, and then sought to achieve multiple perspective by illustrating it in a variety of ways. One student, who recognized this, wrote on her examination: . . . This was the main point You made it at the beginning and spent the rest of the time illustrating it! This non-linear presentation probably favoured the new media.

Dr. William's article describes the examination, results, and interpretations.

REACTIONS

The home television audience was invited to write in, commenting on the show and telling what they understood of the lecture. Some three hundred did so. About a third of the letters were simply requests for copies of the script; the remainder ranged from a few crack-pot replies (I knew from your face you were just the person who would help me...:) to sophisticated, penetrating essays. In fact, the home audience,

74

not the students, wrote by far the best analyses of the lecture.

Announcement of the results (television won, followed by lecture, film, radio, and finally print) evoked considerable interest. Two weeks after the experiment, the senior members of our group appeared as a panel on television and discussed the findings. The CBC then released a publicity statement and the story was picked up by newspapers, including the *New York Times*. All stressed the high score of television and, by implication, its superiority as an educational medium. The president of a local marketing association read the release to a banquet of advertising men with the comment that here, at last, was scientific proof of the superiority of television.

Within a week about 120 letters were received from advertising agencies and groups concerned with educational television. The former were often written in the super-heated jargon of the trade (Dear Eddie: Your experiment came with providential timing. . . .) and were concerned with one problem: how to sell expensive television time to reluctant advertisers.

Our own reaction was equally revealing. About twenty of us in the seminar placed bets on the outcome. Academics all, we each seriously thought print would win, and merely selected other media as sporting bets. When the results were announced, everyone modified his stand, rationalized the results and said, *naturally* television won.

The reaction within CBC was divided, largely along radio-television *lines*. This was unfortunate and missed the main point, for the results did not indicate the superiority of one medium over others. They merely directed attention toward differences between them, so great as to be differences of kind rather than degree. Each communication channel codifies reality differently and thus influences, to a surprising degree, the content of the message communicated. It strikes me this approach is more rewarding than the statistical, ho-hum one of most current audience research.

Edmund S. Carpenter