Review Articles

Communications in Modern Society

Communications in Modern Society: Fifteen Studies of the Mass Media Prepared for the University of Illinois Institute of Communications Research. Edited by Wilbur Schramm. Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 1948, 252 p. $4.00.

The small but increasingly important corpus of literature in the field of communications research has gained an important and valuable member in this collection of 15 essays toward the solution of the problems set by the rapid and uncharted expansion of the media of mass communication. It is perhaps typical of the way institutions develop that the lineal antecedent[1] of this volume should have been concerned with the administration of mass communications in the public interest, and that the book now reviewed, appearing six years later from another midwestern university, should be concerned primarily with research. The administration of mass communications has gone on for better or worse during a critical six years in the history of our country. That administration has not been without its staff work, however, and this volume reports the results of some of the research of the war years, together with a statement of some of the social and political problems of mass communication which have been identified and discussed in the interim since August, 1941.

The book grows out of the papers presented at an Institute of Communications Research held at the University of Illinois in the spring of 1948. To quote editor Schramm's penetrating introduction, "A group of communications research men met . . . to talk about the problems of their young field of study, to measure what they had done and what they would do against what needs to be done. . . . They came to take stock. They asked questions—more than

they could answer. They talked of how they might make their efforts more than the sum of their individual efforts, and of how they might use those efforts toward the better understanding of communications and toward the maximum use of communications for the public good." Out of this talking grew the 15 papers presented in this volume.

The papers fall naturally into six groups of problems: Problems of Control, Extent, and Support; Problems of Process and Channels; Problems of Audiences; Problems of the New Media; Problems of Social Effect; and Problems of Responsibility.

The section "Problems of Control, Extent, and Support" begins with a detailed exposition of the problems of "Communications and Government" by Fred S. Siebert, who considers government, in order, as a restrictive agency, a regulating agency, a facilitating agency, and a participating agency. The subsidiary problems of these four aspects are many, complex and diverse. Tentative conclusions of Mr. Siebert: "Let the government keep its hands off information content, let it be efficient but cautious in regulating the market place, let it be unhampered in facilitating the work of existing media, and let it use its own media where such use seems desirable."

"The Economic Problems in Private Ownership of Communications" are next discussed by Charles V. Kinter. He concludes that the economic problems of our mass communications industry have not become too complex for private owners to solve, and still fulfil their social responsibilities. He does not venture to say whether he thinks it likely that private owners will be overly concerned about their social responsibilities while working hard at solving admittedly complex economic problems.

This problem is in part touched upon in the next essay by Raymond B. Nixon, editor of the *Journalism Quarterly,* in discussing implications of the decreasing numbers of competitive newspapers. Working from Morris B. Ernst's well known concern about the in-

[1] *Print, Radio, and Film in a Democracy:* Ten Papers on the Administration of Mass Communications in the Public Interest—read before the Sixth Annual Institute of the Graduate Library School, The University of Chicago—August 4-9, 1941, edited with an introduction by Douglas Waples. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1942.

creasing number of American cities in which there is no daily newspaper competition, Mr. Nixon admits the facts as presented by Mr. Ernst but denies the necessity of the conclusions Mr. Ernst reaches. Making the point that the one-publisher town is not an evil in itself, but depends on the individual publisher, Mr. Nixon discovers that this one publisher has, in fact, a good deal of competition from other mass media such as the radio, motion picture, and in some areas television. The outcome of that kind of competition is, of course, very much in doubt. The author looks to the development of communications research to help all competing media find their proper audience.

The least satisfactory portion of the book is the second section on "Problems of Process and Channels," probably because work in this field is somewhat new and lacks the concrete objectiveness of some of the other aspects of the communication process. "On Psychology of the Communication Process," by Carl Hovland of Yale University, is in large part a technical discussion of the learning process as a tentative attempt to define methods of showing the effects of a given item of communication. Mr. Hovland concludes that "we do not today have a psychology of communications," but that we "have all the essential ingredients—the research techniques, the concepts and hypotheses, and the problems—to permit developing a genuine science of communications in the coming decade or two."

Even less satisfactory is Edgar Dale's "Psychology of Communication by Picture." This is little more than a list of the various media which a librarian writing on audio-visual aids might talk about. Literally nothing new has been added. So too with "The Sociology of Literature" by Leo Lowenthal. This essay is a subjective description of authorship and the author's problem of communicating his idea to his reader. This reader came away with no increased knowledge of either sociology or literature and with no sense of clarity as to what the phrase "sociology of literature" might mean.

The objective pace of the book picks up again in the third section devoted to "Problems of Audiences." Here are two papers: one devoted to the reading audience by Ralph O. Nafziger, and another to the listening audience by Elmo C. Wilson. Nafziger's paper is notable for its description of the technique and results of recent newspaper readership surveys. It is notable too for its frank realization of the embryonic stage of such study. A beginning has been made and some specific facts are known, but many variables remain to be isolated and studied separately before we can attain a full knowledge of the effects which reading of a newspaper has upon a reader. Elmo C. Wilson does much the same sort of job for radio research, and is aware in much the same way of the myriad problems which remain before we can gain adequate control of radio as a medium of communication. He has some interesting notes too on the beginnings of research in television. Both men are challengingly conscious of the difficulties that still lie ahead of the exciting news that media research will one day reveal.

The essentially elementary stage so far achieved by communications research is best expressed by Bernard Berelson in these words: "Some kinds of communication on some kinds of issues brought to the attention of some kinds of people under some kinds of conditions have some kinds of effects." These five groups of factors: media, issues, people, conditions and effects, are susceptible to research in isolation and in relation with each and it is not until a sufficient amount of imaginative research has been accomplished that it will be possible to identify definitely the specific kinds of communication which have specific kinds of effect. The book ends with an essay on "Professional Freedom and Responsibility in the Press," by Ralph D. Casey, and an essay on the "Responsibility of an Editor," by Robert J. Blakely. Both essays are intelligent and readable approaches to the problems confronting the editor of any newspaper in the selection and display of the news that comes over local, national, and international wires each day. They are worth reading as interesting individual approaches to the problems of editorship in the light of much recent criticism of the American press.

The book is a useful and inspiring description of the achievements and the limitations of communications research today, complete with informative footnotes and a bibliography of 100 titles for further reading. This book

—and a large portion of the bibliography as well—every librarian has an obligation to read in order to gain an understanding of the processes which communicate so many ideas, impressions and attitudes to so many people literally every hour of every day of every year. The results of these communication processes, as they are embodied in one physical form or another, constitute the materials of which our libraries are made.

Librarians who read the volume will be quick to notice one or two obvious omissions. It has nothing to say about audience research in the motion picture field, in the periodical field and in the book field. It is possible, of course, to dismiss the motion picture as having dedicated itself to enter-tainment, pure and simple; but research has shown that attitudes and information are most effectively transmitted by the motion picture—even when the intent is only entertainment. The omission of magazines is less defensible, for they rival newspapers in number, in quality of content and in probable effect. The librarian will most regret the omission of specific attention to research in the book field. Perhaps this omission will serve to point out the need, and will cause librarians and publishers to undertake the necessary research to provide some of the same kinds of answers that the radio and the press is using so effectively.—*LeRoy Charles Merritt, School of Librarianship, University of California.*

Public Relations

Public Relations for Colleges and Universities; a Manual of Practical Procedure. By Christopher Edgar Parsons. Stanford University, Stanford University Press, 1946, 61p.

In the short space of 61 pages, Christopher Edgar Parsons has written a different kind of book on public relations, and an important one. In his own words the author attempts, successfully for the most part, "To define and explain the administrator's own position and function as to public relations, and, further, to construct a sound public relations procedure."

The author is a forceful writer and gives the impression that he writes from a deep knowledge of the subject. He sticks closely to the fundamentals of public relations as opposed to publicity. After pointing out the importance of public relations to an educational institution, he emphasizes that the only firm foundation upon which public relations can be successfully developed is prestige. Prestige, he says, does not depend on wealth or size but results from "public recognition of a worthy undertaking well done." Among the several pitfalls into which institutions are prone to fall and which militate against prestige, one is of particular interest to this reviewer; that of accepting gifts (white elephants) which lead to over-expansion and necessitates the spreading of already meager resources thinner and thinner. Li-brarians have frequently been placed in this situation.

All people connected with the institution in any way, and some who are not, comprise the real instruments of good public relations. The people connected with a college or university are rated in descending order of importance as follows: faculty, student body, alumni, parents of students, and trustees. These groups and all their members are possible agents to help in the creation of prestige. The problem lies in organizing and directing their efforts.

First of all the way in which the institution is to excel must be determined. Then a committee of 10 leaders should be selected from these groups to work with the administrator in planning and developing the program. The author shows a profound knowledge of the principles of leadership in the paragraphs dealing with the selection of these men. If these selections are wisely made the president will have a nucleus of informed, intelligent and capable support which constitute a strong base from which to launch an effective continuing program of public relations.

The problem at this point is to put the people to work and to make them feel a part of the program. The solution lies in acquainting each group, through the leaders, with the definition of the institution's area of prestige and by inviting suggestions from

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