Percy H. Tannenbaum

The Mass Media as Vicarious Experience Or If a Tree Falls in the Forest and It is not Shown on Television, Did the Tree Really Fall?

Das Fernsehen ist erwiesenermaßen für die meisten Zuschauer ein Mittel zur Unterhaltung. Die Bedeutung der Unterhaltung für den Menschen - ob direkt und partizipatorisch oder indirekt, aus zweiter Hand (z. B. durch die Massenmedien) - bedarf einer systematischen Untersuchung. Im vorliegenden Aufsatz wird ein theoretisches Modell vorgestellt, das sich hauptsächlich mit dem Grad von Emotionen befaßt, die durch die Medien hervorgerufen werden. Hierbei wird davon ausgegangen, daß die Gefühle als solche schon für den Zuschauer wichtig sind, daß sie aber auch die Intensität und zu einem gewissen Grad auch die Richtung seines Verhaltens beeinflussen. Es werden Experimente beschrieben, die sich mit den Implikationen dieser Aussage befassen. Die Ergebnisse werden an Hand der vorgeschlagenen Theorie überprüft und anderen Kommunikationsmodellen entgegengesetzt.

There is something wrong somewhere. For a medium that dominates so much of our personal and social lives, on which we, unwittingly or otherwise, depend so much for the picture of the world about us, repeated research studies -- literally, hundreds of them -- fail to find sufficient evidence of deep and/or lasting inference. This situation is not confined to the area of television effects, so may be characteristic of the inadequacy of social science methodology. But could it be that our theories, our various more-or-less agreed-upon speculations and suppositions, are faulty in the first place?

I assure you these represent something more than the self-conscious self-doubts of an academic in mid-career crisis. There is a real gap between what the seemingly reasonable theories suggest and what the data collectively demonstrate. Perhaps the time is ripe for a re-examination of the various propositions that have guided the work in this area -- at least those I happen to subscribe to -- and to share both the certainties and doubts they engender. Such a retrospective investigation is, of necessity, personal and selective, one not necessarily shared by others in the field. In my case, it is done from the perspective of a social psychologist (one of my legitimate callings) and I ask the reader's indulgence while Ire-wind my way through a long past if a rather short history.

An Evolutionary Perspective

I begin with what I regard to be the most basic aspect of humans as a biological species: That they respond to their environment and survive less by some built-in set of mechanisms -- call them instincts, if you will -- than by leaming from the experience of others from whom they are separated in both time and space. Along with other related attributes, the ability to receive, process, store and retrieve information and sort it into meaningful relationships provides man with the capacity to adopt and adapt, i.e. with the means of survival. Of critical importance is the fact that not only can he learn from direct, trial-and-error experience but also indirect, remote, already tested --Le., vicarious -- experience. The latter represents a true case of »no-trial learning« and operates largely by virtue of our capacity to communicate, especially in this case as a recipient of messages from others.

Part of this vicarious learning is passed along in more-or-less formal family and school settings and constitutes part of growing into a culture of behavioral and attitudinal norms. Part is more casually acquired in the course of growing up, merely by watching and listening. Not a small amount may come from in-between sources, neither formal nor as a by-product of everyday living, such as through the mass media. These may be deliberately informational messages designed to teach and instruct. But they can also be in fictionalized forms -- relatively familiar genres of programming that, in the course of telling a story, may also impart certain values, ways of behaving in selected contexts, the conduct of social exchanges, etc. To some, the very fact that they are fictionalized stories make such media messages even more potent as sources of influence for current learning and later behavior - they are supposedly accepted less critically and less defensively just because it is entertainment rather than a didactic lesson.

This still strikes me as an eminently sensible rationale for the study of communication behavior at any level. Less a theory, in the formal sense, than an approach, it still contains testable propositions.

Role of Emotion

I also take it as an article of faith that man does not live by intellect alone, but also with feeling and emotion. Whether or not we have emotional »needs« per se, we do have emotional desires and we are quite willing to expend a lot of effort -- often at considerable sacrifice of time, energy and money -- in pursuit of such preferences. Further, just as a communication capacity allows us to learn vicariously so too can we become emotionally involved through indirect, distal experiences. One of the powerful attractions of the mass media, more specifically of television and films, is that they can pro-

vide so many individuals with so much vicarious emotional experience at so little personal investment.

To be sure, vicarious experience is not the »real thing« so there is bound to be some degree of loss -- try kissing somebody over the telephone to get the idea. It can nevertheless compensate, even substitute, for real experience --it may not be the real thing but it's better than nothing. There is abundant evidence, buttressed by our individual experiences, of our feeling elation and despair, of laughing and crying, loving and hating with considerable intensity from exposure to well-depicted events in films and TV, on stage or in books.

There are times when real experience can also be risky, with elements of direct threat and danger to the individual, so that an important advantage of mediated vicarious experience is its relative safety. The distinction is neatly summarized in a taunting expression from our youth: »Sticks and stones can break my bones but names can never harm me.« By the same token, threatening situations depicted in the entertainment fare of television can be emotionally involving but with their intrinsically dangerous content substantially muted by the simple realization that »it is only a story,« akin to waking up from a bad dream and realizing that it wasn't for real. The viewer can, in fact, have his cake and eat it too: By investing himself emotionally, while suspending reality, he can undergo the excitation of suspense without facing the actual danger; by switching to reality as circumstances warrant, he can have »the best of both worlds.«

This was visibly brought home to me some years ago when I witnessed a Disney Studios production of Expo '67 at Montreal. Filmed in the round with nine cameras and projected similarly on nine screens in a circular room, one had the intense feeling of being in the middle of the event being depicted. One segment was particularly impressive: an automobile chase down a busy city street, with the cameras mounted on the second, pursuing vehicle. At a certain point, the leading car goes into a sharp turn and the pursuing car, the one you feel you are in, does likewise. Involuntarily all persons in the room, myself very much included, gasp and scream, with a decidedly uncomfortable feeling in the pit of the stomach. Feeling somewhat chagrined at being manipulated in such a crass manner I determined to stay through successive showings of the same film. These times, forewarned as to what to expect, I could control my gasping response -- but I never did quite shake the uneasy, queasy physiological response, truly a gut feeling, in my stomach.

This type of reasoning impelled me to study emotional aspects of vicarious emotional behavior -- not an altogether satisfactory research experience because of the unforeseen measurement problems, but neither was it totally without reward. I still think there is a lot to this approach and wish others, more inventive than I, would take up the search.

The Television Medium

Among life's more socially embarrassing moments have been the numerous occasions when one happens to be engaged in a conversation in a room with a TV set on but cannot keep from periodically sneaking a glance at the screen. One doesn't want to do it -- even more, one wants not to do it -- but seemingly cannot help oneself, nor can the conversational partner, no matter how engrossing the conversation is.

How to account for this odd involuntary behavior? Are we all so conditioned to the tube that we literally cannot take our eyes off it for very long? Is it the TV screen or what is being depicted? There have been various suggestions for explaining this phenomenon -- ranging from a physiological »alerting« reaction to the mesmerizing effect of the alternating flicker pattern that comprises the TV image on the screen (like a flame, or moonlight on moving water) -- but none is well established. What is of relevance here is that the television *medium qua medium* -- quite apart from the context it carries and conveys, and in keeping with McLuhan's dictum that »the medium is the message« -- may exercise an effect because of a built-in human susceptibility to certain of its characteristics.

Even less debatable is the notion that the technology of the electronic media makes possible an entire new range of stimuli to enhance the perceived image. This is probably most realized in the presentation of live sports events (among the most popular uses of TV the world over) where the medium can put you in the best seat of the house and give you the advantage of multiple views besides. Clearly, the zoom lens gives both the sports aficionados and the casual observer a greater appreciation of the nuances of the game and the way it is played than is available to the naked human eye. And those of us who can be easily distracted or suffer from a faulty memory need not fret unduly if we missed some critical event because the instant replay, replete with slow motion, can dissect it for us a moment later and often from several points of view.

In a way, it is a pity that these and other benefits of electronic technology are not put to more creative use in other TV programming such as news programs, drama and the like; on the other hand, perhaps they would fail in such alien contexts. Perhaps these matters involving the art of television production are best left to the professional producers, whose main job is to make such decisions, but one cannot help but wonder at the stultifying influence of standardized formats and genres that comprise the TV production landscape. Better yet, a producer-researcher team can be used to try out ideas before the show enters production (so-called formative research). I found this to be a rather pleasant and productive working relationship on several such ventures I engaged in while working at the British Broadcasting Corporation in London and with other programs in the U.S.A.

Television as Industry

Standardization is probably to be expected when we consider that, despite some differences between countries, television is essentially a mass production industry. Initially limited by scarcity of spectrum space and relatively high production costs, it became a limited operation -- a virtual monopoly in some nations, at best an oligarchy in others -- catering to the conception of a mass, amorphous, more-or-less homogenized audience, an »anonymous collection of anonymous individuals.« Further, it has to supply that mass audience with a steady, relentless diet of daily programming.

Especially when the main form of economic support for the broadcasting system is advertising -- but also, surprisingly, when it comes from license fees or general revenues -- there is the pursuit of large audiences for the same kinds of programs. This »common denominator« approach leads directly to popular entertainment fare -- simplified formulas of soap opera, drama, humor, sports, etc. -- that cuts across social divisions and that is so much a staple of television prime time programming in most locations. Once it is mastered, it can be produced with reliability and without undue expense, it is accepted uncritically by most of the audience, and the medium lends itself readily to its widespread dissemination.

Even where advertising support is not necessary, program popularity, in the form of ratings (as much a feature of European broadcasting as it is in the United States), plays a significant role in subsequent selection. Decision-making can be vested in selected authorities -- a cadre of professional broadcasters in some cases, designated government officials in others, profit-minded businessmen elsewhere -- but the record of the general audience's past and anticipated preferences have some influence on their judgements.

This naturally tends to make present and future decisions inordinately conditioned to past successes, which is often the case within a given country and across countries as well. But some innovation does creep through occasionally, often only to become the start of a new fad in itself. The fact that certain home-grown programs (mostly American, it is true, but some British as well) become great international favorites must also be taken into account. What is it about »Dallas« that makes it a must-see, top-rated program in so many diverse cultures? Has it struck the common chord of mankind, or is it merely a by-product of slick production tactics, or of pricing policy and marketing techniques as some of those charging U.S.A. cultural imperialism have contended? When one considers the success of a variety of such cross-national American successes over the years it is hard to avoid the impression of either a marketing conspiracy (although it still takes a buyer as well as a seller to make for an exchange) or that Hollywood has

somehow stumbled onto the commonest denominator of them all in popular entertainment fare.

The Shadow of a Doubt

The mass media in general and broadcast television in particular has been both hailed and condemned -- considerably more so the latter than the former -- as important features of our personal and social environments. Clearly one of the scientific wonders of the 20th century, the still fledging -- barely three decades old -- technology of television has spread to every corner of the globe, to every nation (in fact, an independent television system appears to be one of the claims to nationhood), reaching peaks of over 90 % household penetration in most Western countries -- as universal a social, political, and economic phenomenon as one can cite on the earth. Obviously, it has great intrinsic appeal and application; if it does not exactly meet some vital human need it surely meets one or more human wants.

In spite of -- and probably because of-- its obvious appeal, television has been particularly singled out as either a direct (e. g., in stimulating aggressive behavior) or contributing (e. g., in setting gender or ethnic role prescriptions) agent in promoting what is generally taken as anti-social behavior. It is as if nothing that is so popular can be all that good. Academic researchers and theorists have been in the forefront of such critical attacks. They, along with some governmental officials and other self-acclaimed do-gooders, have recommended a host of reforms in television content and format, especially when it is intended for children and other such presumably vulnerable audiences.

The reformists can cite an arsenal of research studies to back up their claims but, oddly enough, the overall evidence that emerges is far from decisive. None of the studies is robust enough on its own to stand up to standard scientific scrutiny, often leaving as many uncertainties as it answers questions. In some cases, there are contrary findings that just cannot be willed away (more often, as between experimental and field survey investigations, but also within each category). This state of affairs is partly due to inherent limitations in current social science methodology -- poor non-intrusive measures for many of the variables of interest, causality models inadequate to detect and reflect relatively small but consistent differences, etc. -- to which other problems, such as improper selective samples, have often been added.

It is also due to a blatant disregard of the fact that, even in those studies with a »statistically significant« effect, that effect remains a minority one at best. Thus, in some experimental studies, the TV-exposed group may show 14 % of the subjects changing in the hypothesized direction with only 6 % in

the control group; the obtained difference may be significant in the statistical sense but it fails to address why a full 86 % of the exposed group did not behave as predicted. Similarly, in investigations using survey data the obtained correlations usually account for less than 5 % of the total variance in response, still leaving the vast bulk unexplained.

Something is amiss here. The numerous studies provide a proper basis to witness the hypothesized effects but these are hard to fmd. Clearly, the theories are inadequate, or the methodology inappropriate, or both. Never letting data interfere with a pet theory, investigators nevertheless persist in pursuing the same research problems with the same methods, as if persistence and sheer accumulations of data somehow makes up for the lack of a body of systematic evidence.

Many Eyes, One Image

It is the very commonness, even massness of this across-the-board common denominator approach that makes television so much the despair of a country's cultural elite. Yet it is the basis for much of the appeal of the television viewing phenomenon as an object of sociological study. What is so striking about TV behavior is that so many individuals, representing different strata of society, are doing the same thing at the same time, and do so with some regularity across time. If we ascribe, as we must, any influence of the environment over individuals, and if television is such a salient part of that environment (apparently according for the largest single use of leisure time other than sleep), then surely that commonality of behavior must have some effect. That simple proposition, so obvious on the face of it, has been the main basis for the study of television effects, so far too elusive to demonstrate conclusively.

This phenomenon is most apparent on those rare occasions when virtually everybody does drop whatever they are doing and does gravitate to the TV set to attend the same event -- the landing on the moon, Sadat's visit to Jerusalem come to mind, as does the royal wedding of Britain's Prince Charles to Lady Diana and a World Cup football final. These are truly media events -- not exactly created by the media (they would have occurred without the camera and microphones being present) but given greater character and significance by virtue of television's shaping their staging, if not their nature. It becomes an act of international celebration and is ritualized accordingly.

On the surface at least, one would think that such commonality of stimulus would facilitate social integration. If the hypothesis that similar experiences have similar consequences is at all valid, we would expect the diversified audience of such shared television exposure to have more in common

afterwards, to be able to better appreciate, if not necessarily accept, each other's point of view, and the like. Here again, there is little supporting evidence; if anything, it is to the contrary: social cleavages persist and have become even more sharpened with the introduction of mass television, and religious, ethnic, linguistic and political differences become even more manifest. Again, the paradox of data not according to theory must make us question the theory's validity.

For Each, A Carbon Copy

Beyond the seeming uniformity of many aggregate population statistics often lies a teeming mass of individual differences and contrary trends. So it is with television viewing figures -- the program popularity ratings which are so maligned, often deservedly so, but which, if examined properly and creatively, can be highly revealing.

Consider the following: If one examines the audience of a regular weekly program, either a progressive serial or even individually integrated weekly episodes, the picture is one of stability. *Once* a program series is well established, it tends to have the same audience week in, week out -- the overall rating or share (the proportion of TV viewers tuned in to that program) is fairly constant from one week to another, and the demographic composition of that audience (at least by such relatively simple characteristics as age, gender, socio-economic status, etc.) is pretty much the same. The impression is that the program has developed its distinctive audience and that the same audience sticks with it throughout its tenure.

However, when one scrutinizes the individual viewing behavior more closely, the picture is somewhat different: only five-to-ten percent of the total audience watches every single weekly episode of a consecutive 13-week run of a series. On a week-to-week transition, the data reveal a glass half-empty, half-full phenomenon -- roughly 50 % of this week's viewers watched last week, and another 50 % did not. (They may have watched the episode of two or three weeks ago or they may be totally new to the program, but half did not watch two weeks in a row.)

I believe the juxtaposition of these two sets of figures -- the approximately 50 % transition probability of the same viewers from one week to the next, coupled with a total audience of fairly constant size and composition -- to be one of the more profound sociological aspects of television today. It is as if for each viewer there is another one just like him -- a clone, if you wish -- ready to step in and take his or her place in case they should not be able to attend to their viewing that particular week. How else to explain the constancy of the overall audience with the variability of its individual components?

Incidentally, similar fmdings emerge from an analysis of individual viewing data at the transition points between programs on a given evening. It has long been a belief in the television industry that once people tune into a given channel they will be inclined to stick with it, other things being equal. It turns out that is true, but again for only approximately half the viewers. The other half either switch to another program on another channel or stop watching TV at that juncture (although sometimes to return again later on in the evening). It is not completely true, as some commentators prone to overgeneralization have claimed, that people don't watch programs, they watch television.

Never too Much of a Good Thing

In recent years, I came across a bit of communication behavior that was a source of considerable surprise. It concerned the tendency of some persons to deliberately elect to watch a television program more than once within a short period of time, and to do so in preference to watching something new that they had not seen before. Just because I would not think of engaging in such behavior on my own (actually I have given it some thought subsequently) made me think this was aberrant behavior but actually it is not that uncommon in some other non-television behavior (e. g., listening to one's favorite musical selections).

Individuals don't do this with just any program, of course, only with their favorites. Apparently, given a choice, they like to relive some pleasant previous experience. While the repeat performance may not be quite up to the original there is enough of a residual effect apparently to make the sheer repetition worthwhile.

That this occurred at all was somewhat of a surprise; that it occurred even when some effort was required is even more so. In this case, I had rigged up a laboratory apparatus by which individuals wanting to watch a given program had to pedal with considerable energy on an exercycle to keep the program on the TV screen; relax on the pedalling and both the image and the accompanying sound would drop away. Even when subjects had seen the same episode of a detective series all the way through just two weeks previously (and hence could be expected to remember the ending) they kept on pedalling right to the end of the repeat performance, apparently relishing every minute of it.

What is particularly impressive about such behavior is that it occurs only for entertainment, not informational, programming. Apparently, once the individuals know something has happened they can rely on memory to go through the same experience or merely to recall the facts. But for emotion-related entertainment programs they prefer a reliving of the same experience.

These people are trying to tell us something, but are we listening? Instead, we seem bent on pursuing the same old ideas with the same old, somewhat flawed methods. Is this any way to operate a scholarly field?