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New Approaches to the Analysis of Mass Media Discourse and Communication

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GEORGE GERBNER

Mass Media Discourse: Message System Analysis as a Component of Cultural Indicators

Personal tastes and selective habits of cultural participation limit each of us to risky and usually faulty extrapolation about the media experiences of large and diverse populations. The very qualities that draw our attention to exciting plots and to information relevant to our own interests detract from our ability to make representative observations about the composition and structure of large message systems such as mass media discourse.

Mass media discourse reflects policies of media institutions and enters into the cultivation of conceptions in ways that can be investigated. Therefore, informed policy-making and the valid interpretation of social concept formation and response require the development of some indicators of the prevailing winds of the common symbolic environment in which and to which most people respond.

Such indicators are representative abstractions from the collectively experienced total texture of messages. They are the results of analysis applicable to the investigation of the broadest terms of collective cultivation of concepts about life and society. Philosophers, historians, linguists, anthropologists, and others have, of course, addressed such problems before. But the rise of the industrialized and centrally managed discharge of massive symbol-systems into the mainstream of common consciousness has given the inquiry a new urgency and social policy significance. Becoming aware of mass-produced sources of consciousness can also be a liberating experience.

Before we discuss the terms and measures of the analysis, we need to consider the special characteristics of mass media discourse. That consideration will touch upon the nature and distinctive features of public communication in a cultural context whose messages are largely mass-produced and/or distributed by complex industrial structures. The description and definition of the concepts of cultivation and publication, and of their relationships to mass publics created and maintained by mass communication, will complete the background necessary for the development of an approach to message system analysis of mass media discourse.

Public Communication

Distinctive characteristics of large groups of people are acquired in the process of growing up, learning, and living in one culture rather than another. Individuals may make their own selections through which to cultivate personal images, tastes, views, and preferences. But they cannot cultivate what is not available, and will rarely select what is rarely available, seldom emphasized, or infrequently presented.

A culture cultivates patterns of conformity as well as of alienation or rebellion after its own image. In fact, I define culture as a system of messages that regulates social relationships.

The communications of a culture not only inform but form common images; they not only entertain but create publics; they not only reflect but shape attitudes, tastes, preferences. They provide the boundary conditions and overall patterns within which the processes of personal and group-mediated selection, interpretation, and interaction go on.

Communication is interaction through messages. Messages are formally coded symbolic or representational events of some shared significance in a culture, produced for the purpose of evoking significance. Social interaction through such messages is the "humanizing" process of Homo Sapiens. The terms of this interaction define for members of the species the realities and potentials of the human condition. These terms provide functional perspectives of existence, priority, value, and relationships; they cultivate public notions of what is, what is important, what is right, and what is related to what.

A word of *cultivation*. The term is used to indicate that our primary concern is not with bits of information, education, persuasion, etc., or with any kind of direct communication "effects". It is with the common context into which we are born and in response to which different individual and group selections and interpretations of messages takes place. Instead of measuring change causally attributed to communications injected into an otherwise stable system of messages, our analysis is concerned with assessing the system itself. That assessment is a first step toward investigating the role of message systems in establishing and maintaining stable conceptions of reality. These are conceptions that persuasive and informational efforts are usually "up against."

Public is another word of special significance. It means both a quality of information and an amorphous social aggregate whose members share a community of interest. As a quality of information, the awareness that a certain item of knowledge is publicly held (i. e. not only known to many, but *commonly known that it is known to many*) makes collective thought and action possible. Such knowledge gives individuals their awareness of collective strength (or weakness), and a feeling of social identification or alienation. As an amorphous social aggregate, a public is a basic unit of an requirement for self-government among diverse and scattered groups. The creation of both the awareness and the social structure called public is the result of the "public-

making" activity appropriately named *publication.* ("Public opinion" is actually the outcome of eliciting private views and publishing them, as in the publication of polls.)

Publication as a general social process is the creation and cultivation of knowingly shared ways of selecting and viewing events and aspects of life. Mass production and distribution of message systems transforms selected private perspectives into broad public perspectives, and brings mass publics into existence. These publics are maintained through continued publication. They are supplied with selections of information and entertainment, fact and fiction, news and fantasy or "escape" materials which are considered important or interesting or entertaining, and profitable, (or all of these) in terms of the perspectives to be cultivated.

Publication is thus the instrument of community consciousness and of governance among large groups of people too numerous or too dispersed to interact face to face or in any other personally mediated fashion. The truly revolutionary significance of modern mass communication is its broad "public-making" ability. That is the ability to form historically new bases for collective thought and action quickly, continously, and pervasively across previous boundaries of time, space, and culture.

The terms of broadest social interaction are those available in the most widely shared messages of a culture. Increasingly these are mass-produced message systems. Whether one is widely conversant with or unaware of large portions of them, supportive or critical of them, or even alienated from or rebellious of them, these common terms of the culture shape the course of the response.

The institutions producing the most pervasive systems of messages are central to public acculturation, socialization, and the conduct of public affairs. Every society takes special steps to assure that authorative decision-making in the field of public-making is reserved to the key establishments of the power structure, be that religious, secular, public, private, or some mixture of these. The provisions conferring authoritative control to key establishments may be in the form of state monopoly, public subsidy, tax privileges, protection from public interference with private corporate control (as under the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution), or some combination of these.

The oldest form of institutionalized public acculturation is what we today call religion, the cultural organization that once encompassed both statecraft and the public philosophy of a community. Two more recent branches are the offspring of the industrial revolution. One of these is public education or formal schooling for all, born of the struggle for equality of opportunity, and sustained by the demand for minimum literacy, competence, and obeisance in increasingly mobile, de-tribalized, de-traditionalized, and non-deferential societies. The other major branch of institutionalized public acculturation is mass communication.

Mass Communication

Mass communication is mass-produced communication. It is the extension of institutionalized public-making and acculturation beyond the limits of handicraft or other personally mediated interactions. It is the continuous mass production and distribution of systems of messages to groups so large, heterogeneous, and widely dispersed that they could never interact face-to-face or through any other but mass-produced and technologically mediated message systems. This becomes possible only when technological means are available and social organizations emerge for the mass production and distribution of messages.

The key to the historic significance of mass communication does not rest, therefore, in the concept of "masses" as such. There were "masses" (i. e. large groups of people) reached by other forms of public communication long before the advent of modern mass communication. The key to the cultural transformation long before the advent of modern mass communication. The key to the cultural transformation which mass communication signifies is the *mass production* of messages forming message systems characteristic of their technological and industrial bases.

The media of mass communications — print, film, radio, television — are ways of selecting, composing, recording, and sharing stories, symbols, and images. They are also social organizations acting as "governments" (i. e. authoritative decision-makers) in the special domain of institutionalized public acculturation. As such, they are products of technology, corporate (or other collective) organization, mass production, and mass markets. They are the cultural arms of the industrial order from which they spring.

Mass media policies reflect and cultivate not only the general structure of social relations but also specific types of institutional and industrial organization and control. Corporate or collective organization, private or public control, and the priorities given to artistic, political, economic or other policy considerations govern their overall operations, affect their relationships to other institutions and shape their public functions. The general context of public consciousness today may have more to do with industrial power, structure and control than with anything else.

Mass Media Message Systems

Mass-produced and/or distributed media discourse is thus both a record and an instrument of industrial behaviour in the cultural field. Its analysis can shed light on its actual controls and functions, independently from policy intentions, rationalizations, and pretentions or from assumptions and claims about its effects. Such analysis is not a substitute for the study of policies and effects. Rather it is a source both of hypotheses for those investigations and

of independent results that can help illuminate, support or counter them. But it can also yield strategic intelligence and results that cannot be obtained in any other way, such as explaining why certain issues, problems, courses of action, etc. become salient to large numbers of people at certain times. Message system analysis of mass media discourse is one leg of the three-legged stool of comprehensive cultural indicators, including three types of investigations; institutional policy analysis, message system analysis, and cultivation analysis. (See Gerbner, et al., 1973a)

The Analysis

Message system analysis is thus designed to investigate the aggregate and collective premises presented in mass media discourse. It deals with the "facts of life" and dynamic qualities represented in the systems. Its purpose is to describe the symbolic "world," sense its climate, trace its currents, and identify its functions.

The results make no reference to single communications. They do not interpret selected units of symbolic material or draw conclusions about artistic style or merit. That is the task of essaying works of personal and selective relevance, not necessarily representative of a system of image and message mass-production. Message system analysis seeks to examine what large and heterogeneous communities absorb but not necessarily what any individual selects.

The analysis extracts from the discourse its basic presentation of elements of existence, importance, value, and relationship, and then re-aggregates these elements into larger patterns along lines of investigate purpose. The analysis pivots on the reliable determination of these elements and is limited to clearly preceived and reliably coded items. That limitation does not mean that message system analysis pays attention only to surface structure cues (words, etc.) of discourses. Nor does it leave out the semantic, pragmatic, and other systematically assessible dimensions of messages. It only means that, unlike artistic and literary criticism of a traditional kind, useful for purpose of revealing personal interpretation and unique insight, message system analysis deals with the common elements of discourse such as thematic distribution, propositional context, characterization and action structure, social typing, fate (success, failure) of character types, and other reliably identifiable representations and configurations. If one were to use the perceptions and impressions of casual observers, no matter how sophisticated, the value of the investigation could be reduced, and its purpose confounded. Only an aggregation of unambiguous message elements and their separation from personal impressions left by unidentified clues will provide a valid and reliable standard for comparison with the intentions and claims of policy makers and the perceptions or conceptions of audiences.

What distinguishes the analysis of public, mass-mediated message systems as a social scientific enterprise from other types of observation, commentary, or criticism is the attempt to deal comprehensively, systematically, and generally rather than specifically and selectively or *ad hoc* with patterns of collective cultural life. This approach makes no prior assumptions about such conventionally demarcated functions as "information" and "entertainment," or "high culture" and "low culture." Style of expression, quality of representation, artistic excellence, or the nature of individual experience associated with selective exposure to and participation in mass-cultural activity are not relevant for this purpose. What is informative, entertaining (or both), good, bad, or indifferent by any standard are selective judgments applied to messages in a way that may be quite independent from the functions they actually perform in the context of message systems touching the collective life of a large and diverse populations. Conventional and formal judgments applied to selected communications may be irrelevant to general questions about the presentation of what is, what is important, what is right, and what is related to what in mass-produced message systems.

It should be stressed again that the characteristics of a message system are not necessarily the characteristics of individual units composing the system. The purpose of the study of a system *as system* is to reveal features, processes, and relationships expressed in the whole, not in its parts. Unlike most literary or dramatic criticism, or, in fact, most personal cultural participation and judgment, message system analysis focuses on the record of industrial behavior in the cultural field and its symbolic functions.

Symbolic functions

Symbolic functions are implicit in the way basic elements of a system are presented, weighted, loaded with attributes, and related to each other. Such elements are time, space, characterizations (people) and their fate (success, failure; domination, submission, etc.). Dynamic symbol systems are not maps of some other "real" territory. They are our mythology, our organs of social meaning. They make visible some conceptions of the invisible forces of life and society. We select and shape them to bend otherwise elusive facts to our (not always conscious) purposes. Whether we know it or intend it or not, these purposes are implicit in the way things actually work out in the symbolic world.

On the whole, and in the long run, institutional interests and pressures shape the way things work out in most collective myths, celebrations, and rituals. Mass-produced message systems (as all standardized and assembly-line products) are even more power-ridden and policy-directed. Various power roles enter into the decision-making process that prescribes, selects and shapes the final product. In the creation of news, facts impose some constraints upon invention; the burden of serving institutional purposes is

placed upon selection, treatment and display. Fiction and drama carry no presumption of facticity and thus do not inhibit the candid expression of social values. On the contrary, they give free reign to adjusting facts to institutional purpose. Fiction can thus perform social symbolic functions more directly than can other forms of discourse.

Symbolic functions differ from those of nonsymbolic events in the ways in which causal relationships must be traced in the two realms. Physical causation exists outside and independently of consciousness. Trees do not grow and chemicals do not react "on purpose," although human purposes may intervene or cause them to function. When a sequence of physical events is set in motion, we have only partial awareness and little control over the entire chain of its consequences.

The symbolic world, however, is totally invented. The reasons why things exist in the symbolic world, and the ways in which things are related to one another and to their symbolic consequences, are completely artificial. The laws of the symbolic world are entirely socially and culturally determined. Whatever exists in the symbolic world is there because someone put it there. The reason may be a marketing or programming decision or a feeling that it will "improve the story." Having been put there, things not only stand for other things as all symbols do, but also *do* something in their symbolic context. The introduction (or elimination) of a character, a scene, an event, has functional consequences. It changes other things in the story. It makes the whole work "work" differently.

A structure may accomodate to pressure in a way that preserves, or even enhances, the symbolic functions of an act. For example, the first response of television program producers to agitation about violence on television was to eliminate violent women characters, thereby reducing violent acts but also making women involved in violence totally victimized. In other words, we found that when the proportion of violent characterizations was selectively (and temporarily) reduced, the imbalance in the risks of victimization between groups of unequal social power increased, thereby strengthening the symbolic function of violence as a demonstration of relative social powers (Gerbner, 1972).

In another study (Nunally, 1960), the opinions of experts on 10 information questions concerning the mentally ill were compared with mass media (most fictional and dramatic) representations of mentally ill characters. The mass media image was found to diverge widely from the expert image. The "public image," as determined by a attitude survey along the same dimensions, fell between the expert and the media profiles. Thus, instead of "mediating" expert views, the media tended to cultivate conceptions far different from and in many ways opposed to those of the experts. What may be seen in isolation as "ineffective" communication was, on the contrary, powerful media cultivation "pulling" popular notions away from expert views. The symbolic functions of mental illness in popular drama and news may well be

to indicate unpredictability, danger, or morally and dramatically appropriate punishment for certain sins — all very different from its diagnostic and therapeutic conceptions.

The study of specific message structures and symbolic functions reveals how these communications help define, characterize, and decide the course of life, the fate of people, and the nature of society in a symbolic world. The "facts" of that world are often different from those of the "real" world, but their functions are those of the real social order. For example, in U.S. television drama, male characters outnumber female characters more than three to one. They dominate the symbolic world, and present more than their share of activities and opportunities. Fiction, drama, and news depict situations and present actions in those realistic, fantastic, tragic, or comic ways that provide the most appropriate symbolic context for the emergence of some institutional and social significance that could not be presented or would not be accepted (let alone enjoyed) in other ways.

Terms of Analysis

Message system analysis thus investigates industrial behaviour in message mass-production for large and heterogeneous populations. The analysis suggests collective and common features and functions of public image formation. The schema and methods of analysis are designed to inquire into those dimensions of mass media discourse that identify elements of *existence*, *importance*, *values*, and *relationships*. Figure 1 summarizes the questions, terms, and measures of analysis relevant to each dimension.

The dimension of existence deals with the question "What is?", that is, what is available (can be attended to) in public message systems, how

Dimensions	Existence	Priorities	Values	Relationships
Assumptions about:	WHAT IS?	WHAT IS IMPORTANT?	WHAT IS RIGHT OR WRONG, GOOD OR BAD, ETC.?	WHAT IS RELATED TO WHAT, AND HOW?
Questions:	What is available for public attention? How much and how frequently?	In what context or order of importance?	In what light, from what point of view, with what associated judgments?	In what over-all proximal, logical, or causal structure?
Terms and measures of analysis:	ATTENTION Prevalence, rate, complexity, variations	EMPHASIS Ordering, ranking, scaling for prominence, centrality or intensity	TENDENCY Measures of critical and differential tendency; qualities traits	STRUCTURE Correlations, clustering; structure of action

Fig. 1. Dimensions, Questions, Terms and Measures of Message System Analysis

frequently, and in what proportions. The availability of shared messages defines the scope of public attention. The measure of attention, therefore, indicates the presence, frequency, rate, complexity, and varying distributions of items, topics, themes, etc., presented in message systems.

The dimension of *importance* addresses the question, "What is important?" We use measures of *emphasis* to study the context of relative prominence and order or degrees of intensity, centrality, importance. Measures of attention and emphasis may be combined to indicate not only the allocation but also the focusing of attention in a system.

The dimension of *values* inquires into the point of view from which things are presented. It notes certain evaluative and other qualitative characteristics, traits, or connotations attached to themes, events, items, actions, persons, groups, and so on. Measures of *tendency* are used to assess the direction of value judgments observed in units of attention.

The dimension of *relationships* focuses on the associations within and among measures of attention, emphasis, and tendency. When we deal with patterns instead of only simple distributions, or when we relate the clustering of measures to one another, we illuminate the underlying *structure* of assumptions about existence, importance, and values represented in message systems.

The four dimensions, then, yield measures of attention, emphasis, tendency, and structure. *Attention* is the typology or classification of units of discourse into categories of existence (subjects, themes, demographic characteristics, etc.); *emphasis* is the relative importance attributed to each unit attended to within the context of the discourse; *tendency* is the evaluative and other qualities attributed to each unit of attention; and *structure* is the ways in which categories of attention (existence) are related to emphasis (importance) and tendency (values) in the system. For a full and comprehensive analysis, all four dimensions should be included.

Message system analysis begins with the determination of appropriate samples and units of analysis, and the development of an instrument of analysis (coding and recording scheme). The sample should be large enough to permit the development of stable patterns and the assessment of the significance of differences in the distribution of characteristics. The units of analysis should correspond to the units of production as much as possible (newspapers, pages, films, programs, books for context units; stories, scenes, characters, themes, etc., for units of enumeration). The instrument of analysis should be as explicit as possible to facilitate reliable coding and the recording of observations.

The Measures

Let us now discuss each measure in greater detail and illustrate them with examples.

1. Attention indicates the presence (or absence) and frequency of selected elements of existence that a system of messages makes available for public attention. These can be a subject classification, list of themes, typology of characters, or any other category scheme relevant to the purpose of the investigation. The principal issue here is to determine "what is" in the system to which people can attend, and how frequently does each element appear in the system.

Most content analyses use the measure of attention to determine the occurrence of relevant items, themes, and other characteristics in press coverage, dramatic and fictional analyses, thematic study of magazine stories, ads, films, etc. For example, we have studied trends in media attention to mental illness (Gerbner, 1959); the relative amounts of attention that the press systems of different countries devoted to the outside world (Gerbner and Marvanyi, 1977); the representation of teachers, schools, and students in the mass media of 10 countries (Gerbner, et al, 1973b); the image of the "film hero" in one year's feature film production of six countries (Gerbner, 1969); and the demography of the dramatic character population of U.S. television drama (Gerbner and Signorielli, 1982). A typical attention item has a subject title or question, (i. e. "Foreign News," "Occupation," "Character's Success or Failure," "Character's Age,") and several answers, including "cannot code," "uncertain, mixed," and "other-write in," as well as the most relevant substantive categories.

2. Emphasis is a measure of the relative importance of a unit of attention in the sample. Emphasis directs attention to some units at the expense of attending to other units. The headline or title of a story, its size and placement, the intensity of the mode of communication, the order of presentation, loudness, tone, prominence by other means such as duration, focus, detail, etc. and certain design characteristics are marks of emphasis. Emphasis is always a relative measure and an element of context. Therefore ranks, scales, and other measures of relative value are suitable for indicating emphasis. Frequency (a measure of attention) may also denote emphasis, but there ale elements of discourse that are prominent for their relative rarity, while others may receive emphasis by repetition. Therefore, a measure of emphasis that is separate from frequency is sometimes desirable.

The emphasis code (rank order, scale number, etc.) is generally attributed to the unit of attention. It answers the question: Now that we have established that something exists in the system and thus may be attended to (attention), let us note how prominent or important it is.

Message system analysis may feature the units of attention that receive the highest emphasis, such as a study of headlines in a comparative investigation of national press perspectives (Gerbner, 1961) or an investigation of leading characters in television drama (Gerbner and Signorielli, 1982). Usually, however, separate and independent measures of attention and of emphasis can illuminate different facets of the system. For example, we have found

that one general feature of the representation of women and minorities on American television is that even when their numbers exceeds their proportion of the real population (which is rare), they are more likely to play minor or secondary than major or leading parts (Gerbner and Signorielli, 1979).

3. Tendency is a measure of the evaluative or other qualitative characteristics attributes to a unit of attention. It is often a scale defined by such adjectives as good—bad, right—wrong, positive—negative, active—passive, strong—weak, smart—stupid, successful—unsuccessful, or whatever is germane to the purpose of the investigation. A group of such scales may stem from and define a factorial structure of dimension of meaning or personality types such as semantic differential scales. The measure of tendency attempts to answer the question: Now that we have established the distribution of attention and emphasis in the system, in what evaluative, qualitative, judgmental light is each unit presented?

Measuring tendency is clearly separate from coding attention and emphasis; whether something is good or bad does not depend on its frequency or prominence. However, the ultimate combination (an element of structure) may determine its meaning. The frequency and prominence of good things certainly impresses us differently from the frequency and prominence of bad things.

Although tendency is thus usually an element of the structure of a message system, presented in conjunction with the other measures, it can also be the principal feature of the investigation. For example, a study of ideological tendencies in the French press showed that different political organs reported a criminal case in different light, even when shifts of attention and emphasis were considered equal (Gerbner, 1964).

4. Structure is that aspect of the context of a message system that reveals underlying relationships among the other dimensions. These relationships are "underlying" in that they are not necessarily given in single units but are characteristics of the system as a whole. A story may present a violent criminal as an "ex mental patient," a doctor as wise and authoritative, and a politician as opportunistic. If the *majority* of stories in a message system present mental patients as violent, doctors as omniscient, and politicians as venal, we are dealing with structural characteristics of the system ("stereotypes") whose meaning for the policies that produce it and the assumption it may cultivate are very different from that of isolated portrayals.

Most of the studies cited in the bibliography and virtually all full-fledged message system analyses investigate the underlaying structure of message systems. Some also relate that structure to theories of the cultural functions of institutions and to theories of cultivation and media effects. Examples of such research can be found in the development of our theory of "mainstreaming" (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, and Signorielli, 1980) and its application to political orientations (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, and Signorielli, 1982).

The analysis of mass media message systems can thus provide a framework in which comprehensive, coherent, cumulative, and comparative mass-cultural information can be systematically assembled and periodically reported. Indicators relevant to specific problems or policies can then be seen in the context of the entire structure of assumptions cultivated at a particular time and place.

These indicators will not tell us what individuals think or do. But they will tell us what most people think or do something *about* and suggest reasons why. They will tell us about industrial policy and process in the cultural field mass-producing shared representations of life and the assumptions and functions embedded in them. They will help understand, judge, and shape the symbolic environment that affects much of what we think and do in common.

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