

PSYCHOLOGY, PSYCHIATRY AND MENTAL ILLNESS IN
THE MASS MEDIA: A STUDY OF TRENDS 1900-1957

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The "psychological trend" in mass communications and popular culture has been the subject of much stimulating discussion but little objective study. As part of our research on communications problems in the area of popular conceptions of mental health, we gathered information about certain aspects of the currents of attention devoted to psychological and mental illness topics in the mass media.*

Our search for centralized sources of information about media content led to standard reference guides as indicators of the availability of printed material under relevant headings over periods of time. But who indexes movies and television programs? The answer we found is: the censors. Censorship is conducive to centralized record-keeping and classifying not found anywhere else in the industry. With information collected from these sources, we were able to trace the ebb and flow of attention devoted to mental illness topics and the mental health professions in popular magazines over the last half century, in the New York Times since 1913, in feature movies since 1944, and on television since 1954.

Since our vantage point is primarily that of communications research, we shall not attempt, but wish to invite, interpretation of our findings in terms of the history of the mental health movement or of the professions concerned. We shall limit ourselves to reporting the findings and concluding with a few suggestions pertinent to mass communications theory and public information strategy.

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POPULAR MAGAZINES

The Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature was examined for policy, format, typography, and general consistency of indexing over the years. Preliminary calculations indicated that the few changes that did take place had no substantial effect on the relative proportions of articles indexed under any one topic. Multiple listings of articles appeared negligible. Changes in subject headings did, of course, complicate the task of tabulation, but tracing these changes yielded clues to changing emphases.

We shall anticipate the next section by noting that the same procedure was followed with respect to the New York Times Index from which we derived our estimate of trends in the Times's coverage of our subjects. The general stability of indexing policies and the apparent consistency of our findings across the media suggest that within their proper limits and with certain cautions these reference tools can be used for the assessment of trends in the availability of materials on selected topics.

The Reader's Guide, of course, does not index all popular magazines, and the New York Times Index covers but a single newspaper. But the 100-odd magazines indexed in the Reader's Guide for over half a century include most of the major magazines libraries consider to be of lasting value. Listings also mean, therefore, availability in libraries across the country. Similarly, the New York Times Index opens channels of information beyond the actual coverage of the Times. It also provides us with a comparison of magazine and press policies in regard to our subjects.

The subject headings examined in each volume of the two indexes were those we thought to be most directly relevant to mental illness, psychiatry, and psychology. Our criteria of relevance had to be arbitrary. We included headings such as Amnesia and Hypnotism because of the role of these subjects

in popular fiction and drama. We excluded Child Study and its predecessors because it led us too far afield. The final list (See Table 1) may be subjected to criticism for a number of reasons, but it appeared adequate for our purposes. Also, preliminary computations indicated that the addition or substitution of closely related subjects would not have materially altered our general results.

Subject headings in the Reader's Guide

The genealogy of subject headings presents a study in shifting concepts and evolution of terms.

Subject headings in periodical reference guides are not easily changed. Many librarians rely on these guides for their own indexing procedures, and a change in headings involves costly revision of files. Subject heading in the H. W. Wilson periodical indexes reflect (a) common usage of terms, (b) professional usage in the specialized fields, and (c) the editors' striving for consistency and permanence amidst the semantic flux of our times. Asked about her policy in regard to outmoded headings, the editor of the Reader's Guide once commented: "When I shudder at them and can't stand them any longer, I finally change them."^{*}

A glance at Table 1 will show that only six of the complete list of forty-three headings appeared in the first (1800 - 1904) bound volume of the Reader's Guide. They were: Insanity, Insane Hospitals, Idiocy, Defective Children, Hypnotism, and Psychology.

Table 1 about here

The number of headings more than tripled by 1910. Mental Hygiene and Mental Disease (the latter changed to Mental Illness in 1955) joined Insanity to furnish a substantial amount of listings through the years. Defective

^{*}Lawler, John, The H.W. Wilson Company: Half a Century of Bibliographic Publishing. Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1950, p. 103. See Chapter VII for a more detailed discussion of indexing policies.

Children merged into Defective Classes, then Defectives, which, together with Feeble-Minded, became Mentally Handicapped in 1957. Abnormal Children and Backward Children split off from Defective Classes. Insanity and Crime was initiated, and Amnesia began as a separate heading.

Mental Healing began as a major heading (to be changed to Psychotherapy in 1941), and Psychoanalysis was initiated. "Psychological" specialization began: Pathological, Physiological, and Educational sub-headings were soon joined by Research and Experimental. Psychologist originated in 1910, and Psychological Examination in 1915.

The end of World War I found Psychological (later Psychiatric) Clinics and Industrial Psychology added to the list. The late twenties contributed Neurosis, Mongolism, Psychopathic Wards, and Psychiatry itself. The last, started in 1929, subsumed most of the listings previously under Psychology, Pathological.

The only new headings started in the 'thirties were Exceptional Children (later to absorb Abnormal Children) and Insane (later Mentally Ill) Care and Treatment. World War II added Psychological Warfare, and Psychiatry - Military. Its aftermath might have been reflected in the addition of Therapy to Mental Disease (later Mental Illness), of Psychiatric Employees to Insane (now Psychiatric) Hospitals, and in the initiation of Psychiatrist, Child Psychiatry, and Psychoanalysis and Religion.

Changes in terminology (such as Mental Illness for Mental Disease and Insanity, Mentally Handicapped for Feeble-minded and Defectives) marked the indexing trends of the 1950's, along with new subheadings on Diagnosis, Therapy, Rehabilitation, and Social Aspects, under Mental Illness.

General trends

There is little point in proving that the total number of articles written on mental illness, psychiatry, psychology, (and many other subjects)

increased in the last half century. The more significant question is how the number of such articles changed, if at all, in relation to all other topics magazines write about.

The Reader's Guide already provides a "sampling" of periodical literature; any sub-section of its listings is weighted to some extent by the limitations imposed on the whole. But there is still the possibility that changes in the number of articles listed under selected headings reflect changes in these overall limitations -- such as the number of periodicals indexed, or the total size of a volume -- rather than real changes in relative proportions.

We accounted for these possibilities by computing trends three ways, as shown in Table 2. First we obtained simple yearly averages (number of

Table 2 about here

articles listed in bound volume divided by the number of years covered). Then we divided this by the number of periodicals indexed in each volume. Third, we divided the yearly averages by the number of pages contained in each volume.

Figure 1 compares these three ways of computing publication trends.

Figure 1 about here

The yearly averages show an overall climb in the total number of articles indexed under our selected headings, with the last three volumes containing about three times as many relevant articles as the first three volumes, and the sharpest decline occurring in the early 'thirties.

When the number of articles is weighted by the number of periodicals indexed, which, incidentally, has been quite stable, we find a similar curve. The rise from the first to the last three volumes was only two and

one-third; but there were no reversals in trend when the number of periodicals indexed was taken into account.

Weighting by the number of pages contained in each volume of the Reader's Guide changed the overall upward trend; it appears that popular magazine articles on mental illness, psychology, psychiatry, and related subjects did not increase in number in relation to articles on all other subjects listed in the Reader's Guide in the last 59 years.

The year-to-year trends, however, are the same regardless of the way they are computed. What do they show? A glance at Figure 1 reveals the striking similarity of our graphs to the economic trends of the nation. Popular interest in (or exposure to) articles on mental illness, psychiatry, and psychology appears to rise in war and prosperity, and fall during depression or recession.*

THE NEW YORK TIMES

Our historical survey of press coverage was limited to stories published in the New York Times and listed in the New York Times Index, published since 1913, under headings identical or similar to those studied in the Reader's Guide. The method of measurement was in standard pages and fractions of pages of the Index occupied by story listings under these headings.** The results can be seen in Table 3.

*The magazines which accounted for 64 percent of all listings for the entire period were, in order of frequency of articles: Science News Letter, Science Digest, Time, Newsweek, Reader's Digest, Today's Health, Life, Coronet, N.Y. Times Magazine, The Saturday Review, Scientific American and the Saturday Evening Post. For a more detailed account of the shifts of attention among subjects and of magazine publications patterns see "Trends in the Coverage of Mental Illness, Psychiatric and Psychological Subjects in Popular Magazines," by the present author, in press.

**The "standard page" was the 1950-1958 average of 2403 words per page. This method of measurement was used to eliminate the effects of type and format changes in the bound volumes.

Table 3 about here

Figure 2 compares trends in coverage in the New York Times and the frequency of magazine articles weighted by the number of periodicals indexed in the Reader's Guide. It shows that the ups and downs were earlier and more violent in the newspaper, as we might expect especially in comparison with a composite index of many magazines with different editorial policies and publication dates.

Figure 2 about here

The high peak around 1925 reflected a rash of legal, institutional, and crime stories about insanity and an apparent preoccupation with "religious manias" and with the supposed (harmful) effects of prohibition on mental illness. The similar high point in 1948 was the result of news about postwar international developments, about stepped-up legislative and organizational activities, and of the growing impact of studies of the causes of Army draft rejections. The news values of these subjects apparently surpassed their usefulness as materials for magazine articles; the magazine trend shows relatively slight humps for these two periods.

MOVIES

The Production Code Administration of the Motion Picture Association of America, Inc., places its Seal of Approval on about 95 percent of all commercial movies exhibited in the United States. In the course of its review, the PCA also classifies each film by "type," "significant story elements," and other categories.

One category of film "types" is "psychological." Table 4 shows the

number and percentage of films the PCA considered "psychological" from 1944 through 1954. While less than four out of every hundred feature films fell into this category, the output of "psychological" movies ranged from 28 in 1947 to none in 1954.

Table 4 about here

Another, less exclusive, classification is one which notes "significant story elements" in each film. A yearly count of these from 1950 through 1958 (see Table 5) shows that nearly one in ten films contained significant "psychological" story elements in the opinion of the PCA coder. The "psychological" elements rose to a high of 18.4 percent of all films released in 1951, fell to a low of 2.3 percent in 1954, and rose again in 1957. (For an illustration of these trends see Figure 3 below)

Table 5 about here

A check on the types of films most likely to include significant "psychological" story elements showed murder mystery leading with 40 percent of such films (but only 17 percent of all films). Science fiction and horror films accounted for 11 percent of those involving "psychological" story elements (but only 4 percent of all films).*

TELEVISION

Our estimate of trends in the portrayal of mental illness and mental health professionals on television came from the files of a network censor. It is limited to filmed programs, both old movies and filmed TV shows, selected from a clearance file which contains a record of all films screened

*For a detailed account of the content analysis see

for telecast over the network. This record includes a brief synopsis of each program and of censorship action taken, if any. Thus we could tabulate the incidence of filmed programs containing relevant themes or portrayals significant enough to be noted in the synopses.

The results can be seen by year on Table 6. Beginning in appreciable numbers in 1954, the frequency of relevant material screened for network telecast came to a peak in 1957, then declined.

Table 6 about here

A check on the censor's own classification of relevant programs revealed that mental illness themes and portrayals were most likely to occur in TV "drama" (54 percent) and mystery (28 percent) and in feature movie mystery (47 percent) and "drama" (20 percent).

A comparison of trends in the four media will be found on Figure 3. Of course, the comparison does not involve amounts of material; that is, the bottom graphs do not necessarily mean fewer units of relevant content than the top graphs. The figure is designed to compare only relative tendencies, and not magnitudes, in the press, movie, magazine, and TV "coverage" of mental illness, psychological and psychiatric subjects.

Figure 3 about here

CONCLUSIONS

Despite obvious differences (attributable to certain characteristics and business conditions unique to each medium) there are broad similarities among the mass media in the amount of attention devoted to our topics.

These similarities appear to be anchored in basic productive developments of society. The psyche seems to receive a greater share of attention

when Johnny goes marching off, or moves to the suburbs, or buys a new car, then when he might be concerned about a job, or the rent, or the monthly payments. Virtually every low point in relevant output marks a depression or recession; this is true also when relevant material is measured as percentage of total output.

Trends in news and other non-fiction are not independent from currents in popular fiction and drama. Information and education might not be so far removed from what we call entertainment and escape as it is commonly supposed. It may be that we do not really "escape" the concerns that loom large in the "reality material" of news and non-fiction when we turn to entertainment, but only transform them into conventionally stylized fictional and dramatic forms.

Any attempt to communicate ideas or change attitudes about mental illness and the mental health professions calls for a broad concern with the full cultural context in which messages and images are perceived. Limiting the concern to tactics of message-manipulation or to strategies of presenting information alone are likely to be inadequate to the task.

TABLE I

Reader's Guide Subject Headings Examined in the Study of Magazine Trends.

<u>Year</u> <u>Initiated</u>	<u>Headings and changes</u>	<u>Year</u> <u>Initiated</u>	<u>Headings and changes</u>
1900	Insanity and the Insane (changed to Insanity in 1910 to Mental Illness in 1955)	1919	Psychology, Industrial
1900	Defective Children (merged with Defectives in 1910)	1925	Neurosis
1900	Idiocy	1925	Mongolism
1900	Insane Hospitals (changed to Hospitals, Psychiatric in 1947)	1925	Hospitals, Psychopathic Wards, Ended 1951
1900	Hypnotism	1929	Psychiatry
1900	Psychology	1929	Psychiatry, Industrial
1905	Mental Hygiene	1935	Exceptional Children
1905	Mental Disease (changed to Mental Illness in 1955)	1935	Insane, Care and Treatment (changed to Mentally Ill, Care and Treatment, 1955)
1905	Defective Classes (merged with Defectives in 1910)	1941	World War II, Psychological Aspect (changed to Psychological Warfare in 1947)
1905	Feeble-minded (changed to Mentally Handicapped in 1957)	1943	Psychiatry, Military
1905	Backward Children	1945	Psychiatrist
1905	Abnormal Children (merged with Exceptional Children in 1951)	1947	Child Psychiatry
1905	Psychopathic Institutes (only existed 1905-09)	1949	Mental Disease, Therapy (changed to Mental Illness, Therapy, 1955)
1905	Mental Healing (changed to Psychotherapy in 1941)	1949	Schizophrenia
1905	Psychology, Pathological	1949	Psychoanalysis and Religion
1905	Psychology, Physiological, Educational	1951	Mental Disease, Statistics (changed to Mental Illness, Statistics in 1955)
1910	Insanity and Crime (changed to Insane, Criminal and Dangerous; 1948)	1955	Mental Illness, Diagnosis
1910	Amnesia	1955	Mentally Ill, Rehabilitation
1910	Defectives (changed to Mentally Handicapped in 1957)	1957	Mental Illness, Social Aspects
1910	Psychoanalysis		
1910	Psychologist		
1915	Psychological examination		
1915	Psychology, Experimental, Research		
1919	Psychological Clinics (changed to Psychiatric Clinics in 1953)		

TABLE 2

Three Ways of Computing Publication Trends in Reader's Guide*Articles Indexed under Selected Headings
Pertaining to Mental Illness, Psychiatry,
and Psychology

Vol. No.	Years Covered in Volume	Average per year	Average per Year per number of periodicals indexed	Average per year per number of pages in volume
1	1900-04	28	.42	.09
2	1905-09	89	.80	.18
3	1910-14	69	.54	.11
4	1915-18	74	.66	.13
5	1919-21	57	.51	.08
6	1922-24	71	.63	.11
7	1925-28	96	.86	.13
8	1/1929-6/1932	105	.83	.14
9	7/1932-6/1935	62	.58	.07
10	7/1935-6/1937	100	.86	.10
11	7/1937-6/1939	138	1.24	.12
12	7/1939-6/1941	113	.93	.10
13	7/1941-6/1943	139	1.19	.12
14	7/1943-4/1945	129	1.14	.13
15	5/1945-4/1947	123	.99	.11
16	5/1947-4/1949	147	1.16	.13
17	5/1949-3/1951	156	1.28	.13
18	4/1951-3/1953	159	1.32	.13
19	4/1953-2/1955	164	1.32	.12
20	3/1955-2/1957	213	1.85	.16
21	3/1957-2/1959	163	1.47	.13

*Based on a count of the number of articles indexed under headings listed in Table 1. Note that while the bound volumes of the Reader's Guide cover varying time periods in excess of one year, the figures given for each volume are yearly averages -- i.e. total number of articles in volume divided by number of years (and fractions) covered.

FIGURE 1

Comparison of Three Ways of Computing Publication Trends in Popular Magazines based on Reader's Guide listings

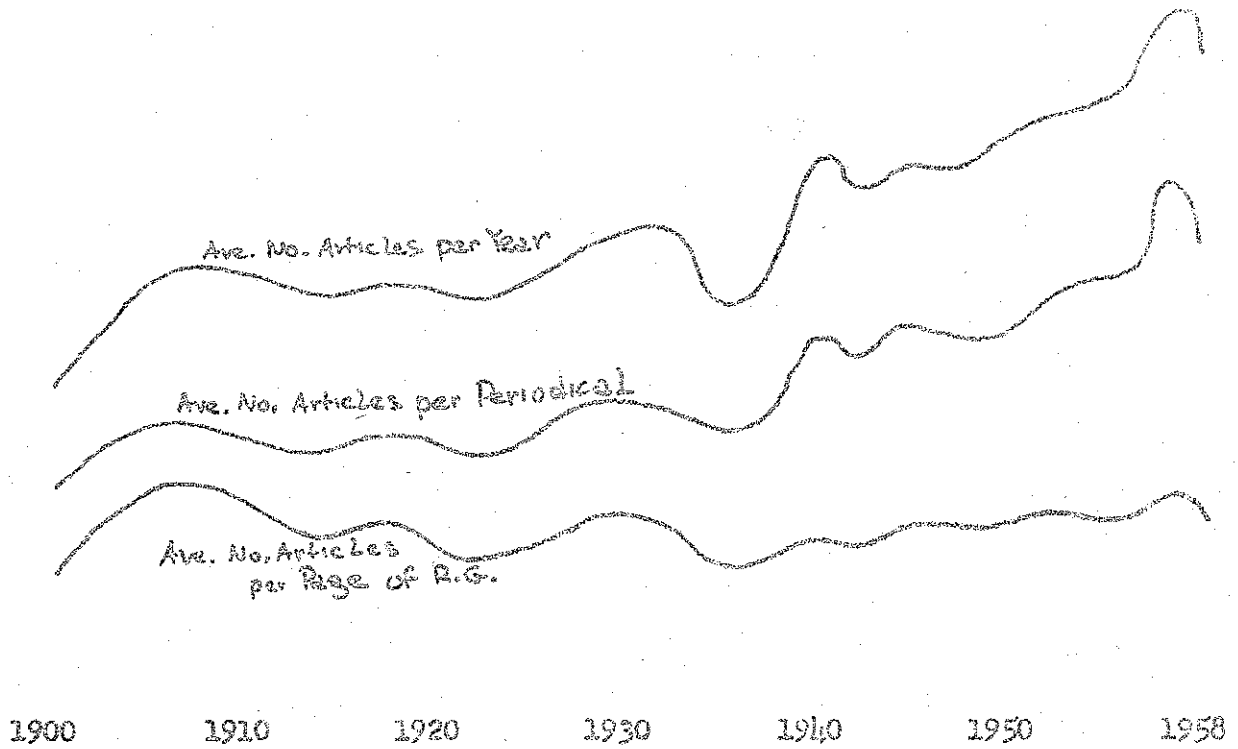


TABLE 3

Stories listed in the New York Times Index Under Selected Readings Pertaining to Mental Illness, Psychiatry, and Psychology, 1913-1958

<u>Year</u>	<u>Listings*</u>	<u>Year</u>	<u>Listings</u>	<u>Year</u>	<u>Listings</u>	<u>Year</u>	<u>Listings</u>
1913	.19	1925	2.21	1937	.67	1948	2.58
1914	.30	1926	1.81	1938	.87	1949	2.49
1915	.44	1927	1.37	1939	.61	1950	2.05
1916	.33	1928	.75	1940	.63	1951	1.57
1917	.16	1929	.87	1941	.55	1952	2.08
1918	.05	1930	.57	1942	.53	1953	1.88
1919	.12	1931	.57	1943	.76	1954	2.24
1920	.17	1932	.37	1944	.76	1955	2.32
1921	.51	1933	.20	1945	.66	1956	1.99
1922	.90	1934	.58	1946	1.33	1957	1.98
1923	.90	1935	.67	1947	1.56	1958	1.85
1924	1.21	1936	.96				

*Expressed in pages and fractions of pages, based on the 1950-1958 standard average of 2403 words per page.

FIGURE 2

Comparison of Publication Trends in Popular Magazine and the New York Times based on Articles Indexed in the Reader's Guide and New York Times Index.

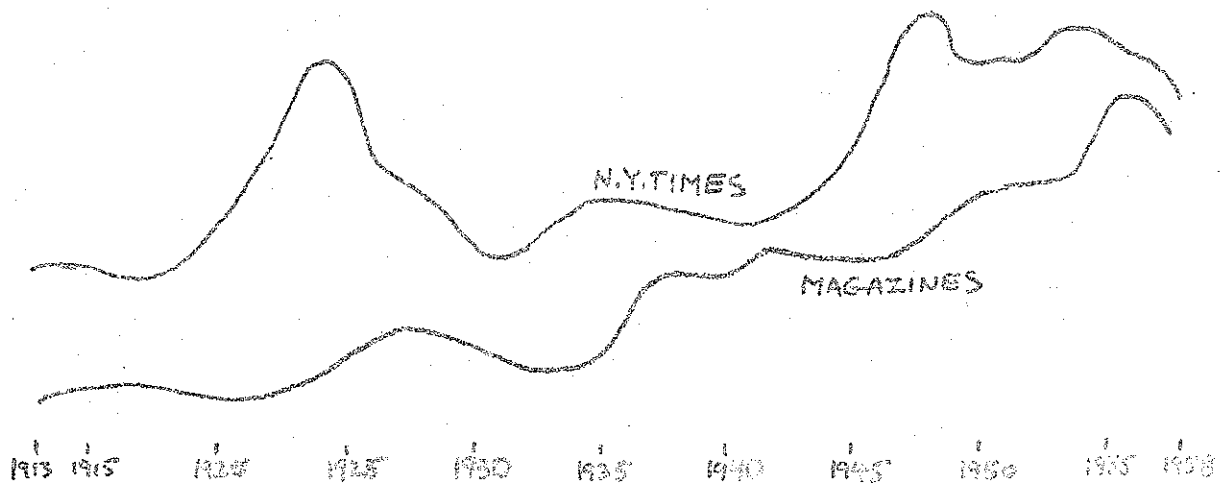


TABLE 4

Feature Films Classified as "Psychological" by the Production Code Administration, 1944-1954.

Year	All Films Approved by FCA	Films Classified as "Psychological"*	
		Number	% of Yearly Total
1944	442	7	1.6
1945	389	12	3.1
1946	425	13	3.1
1947	404	28	7.1
1948	435	16	3.7
1949	419	5	1.2
1950	429	12	2.8
1951	432	15	3.5
1952	368	2	.5
1953	354	4	1.1
1954	303	—	—
Total	4400	159	3.6

*The number of films approved by the Production Code Administration is published in the International Motion Picture Almanac. It includes both U.S. and foreign films receiving the FCA Seal of Approval, about 95% of all commercial movies distributed in the U.S. Classification of films into "psychological" and other "types" is done by the FCA but the results are not generally available. Our figures are based on information released to the Hollywood Quarterly (February 1946-47 issue) and similar information collected by Dorothy Jones for John Cogley's study on Report on Blacklisting-I. Movies, New York: The Fund for the Republic Inc., 1956.

TABLE 5

Feature Films Classified by the Production Code Administration as Containing Significant "Psychological" Story Elements, 1950-1958.

Year	All Films Approved by FCA	Films Classified as Having "Psychological" as "Significant Story Elements"*	
		Number	%
1950	429	29	6.8
1951	432	79	18.4
1952	368	42	11.4
1953	354	21	6.0
1954	303	7	2.3
1955	305	15	4.9
1956	337	28	8.4
1957	380	52	13.7
1958	288	29	10.4
Totals	3196	302	9.4% totals

*These figures were made available by the Motion Picture Association of America, Inc.

TABLE 6

Number of Filmed Programs Involving Mental Illness Subjects
Cleared for Telecast Over a National Network, 1954-1958

Year	Mental Illness etc. Noted in Synopsis
1954	19
1955	22
1956	31
1957	57
1958	44

FIGURE 3

Comparison of Trends in the Four Media

