

What Does the Eye See— The Ear Hear?

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*The eye—it cannot choose but see;
we cannot bid the ear be still;
our bodies feel, where'er they be,
against or with our will.*

—William Wordsworth

WORDSWORTH'S IDEA, despite the beauty with which it is expressed, has been questioned by the findings of social science. Gradually it has come to be recognized that the eye which "cannot choose but see" may be a "jaundiced" one that sees everything in yellow hues. And the ear that cannot be stilled may hear only those messages that express a narrow range of ideas and values.

Research on communication and evidence gathered in the social sciences repeatedly show how difficult it is to communicate with individuals who are not already in favor of a given message. People generally tend to avoid situations where they feel they will be exposed to communications that are different from their own views and beliefs. The persons to whom a message is directed may, in fact, be the ones least likely to be reached by it. Thus, if we want to communicate, it is not enough to merely increase the volume of messages. We must be aware of those thought processes that hinder understanding of what we say.

SELECTIVE PROCESSES

These self-protective exercises are known as the selective processes—*selective exposure, selective perception and selective retention.*¹

¹ Joseph T. Klapper, *The Effects of Mass Communication* (New York: The Free Press, 1965).

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Selective exposure refers to the tendency of individuals to expose themselves to communications that agree with their existing opinions and interests. They also avoid communications that might be irritating or incompatible with their opinions.

Twenty-five years ago, one researcher concluded that radio was ineffective in changing rural opinions because rural people generally would not listen to views with which they seriously disagreed.² Evidence gathered from other research indicates that farmers are not unique in this respect. In a study of voters in a presidential election it was found that Republican partisans tended not to listen to Democratic candidates and vice versa.³ A media campaign designed to increase information about the UN and improve attitudes toward it was most widely attended by persons whose interest in the organization was already high.⁴ Cooper and Jahoda reported evidence of selective exposure to a radio program intended to promote friendship and mutual respect among immigrant groups. They found that a program about Italians was listened to mainly by Italians, a program about Poles by Poles, and so on.⁵

Selective Perception and Retention

An individual, if he should be exposed to a message incompatible with his opinions, may distort the message or remember only parts of it. This distortion is selective perception. Selective retention refers to the process whereby the individual learns more quickly and remembers for a longer period of time communications that are compatible with his own interests and predispositions. The line of demarcation between selective perception and selective retention is a fine one. In some instances it is impossible to distinguish between the two. For example, when a person who has been exposed to a message presents a distorted or incomplete report of its content, it is difficult to determine whether the content was selectively perceived in the first place, whether it was correctly perceived and not retained, or whether the two processes complemented one another.

² W. S. Robinson, "Radio Comes to the Farmer," in Paul F. Lazarsfeld and Frank Stanton (eds.), *Radio Research* (New York: Duell, Sloane, and Pearce, 1941), p. 267.

³ Paul F. Lazarsfeld, Bernard Berelson, and Hazel Gaudet, *The People's Choice* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1948).

⁴ Shirley Star and Helen McGill Hughes, "Report of an Educational Campaign: the Cincinnati Plan for the United Nations," *American Journal of Sociology*, 55 (1950), 389-400.

⁵ Eunice Cooper and Marie Jahoda, "The Evasion of Propaganda: How Prejudiced People Respond to Anti-Prejudice Propaganda," *Journal of Psychology*, XXIII (January, 1947), 15-25.

Mass communication is vulnerable to selective perception and retention. Wilner found that subjects interpreted the expressions and motives of characters in a pro-tolerance film ("Home of the Brave") in ways that were largely predictable on the basis of their scores on a racial tolerance test.⁶ In a Michigan study, smokers were not as likely to perceive the relationship between smoking and cancer as were nonsmokers who had read identical newspaper and magazine reports.⁷

The existence of selective perception and selective retention is regarded as self-evident by some writers. Lindesmith and Strauss conclude, "The facts are that perception is selective, that motivation and needs sensitize one to specific stimuli or sometimes lead to distorted perception, that stimuli are often misinterpreted and that perceptions of the same situation may vary from individual to individual."⁸

MISSISSIPPI RESEARCH

An exploration of the selective processes was conducted in the fall of 1965 under the auspices of the U.S. Forest Service. This pilot project brought together foresters, meteorologists, and sociologists for multidisciplinary research. A two-county area in southern Mississippi was chosen for the investigation. Within this area two communities, Beech and Chestnut,⁹ were selected for intensive study.

The two study communities were located in an extensive woodland tract that was protected by federal, state, and private fire control agencies. At the time of the study approximately 240 families lived in Beech, 230 in Chestnut. The two communities, located less than five miles apart, appeared to be quite similar: Both were similar in ethnic composition; both were rural; both were approximately equal in total area; both reported similar exposure to mass media. The residential pattern of Beech, however, was more village-like than Chestnut.

Historically, both Beech and Chestnut were part of a region where pioneers had practiced winter burning of the woods in order to hasten the early spring greening of the grasses. Scrub cattle were

⁶ Daniel M. Wilner, "Attitude as a Determinant of Perception in the Mass Media for Communication: Reactions to the Motion Picture, 'Home of the Brave'" (unpublished Doctoral dissertation, University of California, Los Angeles, 1951).

⁷ Charles F. Cannel and James L. MacDonald, "The Impact of Health News on Attitudes and Behavior," *Journalism Quarterly*, XXXIII (1956), 315-23.

⁸ Alfred R. Lindesmith and Anselm L. Strauss, *Social Psychology* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1949), p. 89.

⁹ Beech and Chestnut are fictitious names.

grazed year-long on the free range, poor as it was, so that every cent of income derived from the sale of calves was profit. It was predictable that conflict would eventually occur between the scientific forest landowners and the stockmen. Foresters started planting trees, and stockmen balked.

There was one important difference between the two communities: Chestnut's rate of deliberately setting woods fires was almost three times that of Beech's.

Hypotheses

The variable of incendiarism was viewed as indicating a particular type of social situation. In the community where incendiarism rates were very high it was anticipated that the residents would tend to have unfavorable attitudes toward forestry activities such as reforestation, range management, and fire suppression. Further, it was anticipated that perception-retention rates would be related to these attitudes. It was therefore hypothesized that (1) the frequency of residents' perception-retention of forest fire prevention messages would vary inversely with the incendiarism rate of a given community; (2) residents who perceive and recall forest fire prevention messages would tend to have favorable attitudes toward forestry activities.

Methods

A team of trained field workers interviewed a sample of 209 adult residents. The interviews gathered responses about forestry practices, enforcement of fire prevention laws, the image of foresters, and information sources.

In both communities each interviewee was asked: *Have you seen or heard anything about forest fire prevention in the last six months?* Then the interviewees were requested to tell where they had seen or heard the information. Several questions revealed information about residents' attitudes toward forestry activities. One of these items is the following: *What kind of job do you think the forest fire control agencies are doing in this area: Excellent? Good? Average? Somewhat below average? Poor? Other.*

Approximately two weeks before the interviewing, forest fire prevention posters were placed at conspicuous areas in both communities. An attempt was made, first, to avoid attracting undue attention to putting the posters in place and, second, to provide equal exposure of the posters to all residents.

At the time of the interviews, respondents were asked if they had noticed any fire prevention posters in the area. If they said "yes" they were asked to describe the posters. Then they were requested to correctly identify a photograph of the poster from among several assorted photographs.

Similarly, in the local consolidated high school, attended by students of both communities, these posters were placed at conspicuous places. On the day of the test, students from both communities were interviewed to see if they recalled having seen the posters. They then attempted to identify a photograph of the poster.

FINDINGS

The results tended to bear out the hypotheses. In Chestnut, 49.5 per cent of the interviewees answered yes to the question *Have you seen or heard anything about forest fire prevention in the last six months?* Seventy-nine per cent of those from Beech answered yes. (The difference between these proportions is statistically significant.) This response difference is all the more striking when it is remembered that the two communities were less than five miles apart and, furthermore, that the residents reported approximately equal exposure to mass media.

A similar response pattern was observed in the poster experiments (see Table 1). The majority of correct poster identifications

Table 1. Proportion of respondents recognizing forestry posters by community.

Poster recognition	Community			
	Chestnut		Beech	
	No.	Per cent	No.	Per cent
Correct identifications	19	9.2	30	14.4
Incorrect identifications (includes no-response)	86	41.3	73	35.1
Total	105*	50.5	103	49.5

* One case excluded because of incomplete responses to relevant items.

were made by Beech residents. In both experiments the direction of the findings was consistent with the expectation that a larger proportion of residents from Beech would be able to correctly recall the poster than would residents from Chestnut. Further analysis showed that, on an individual basis, the perception-retention rates for per-

sons with unfavorable attitudes toward forestry activities were lowest of those examined (see Table 2).

Table 2. Proportion of respondents recognizing posters according to attitudes toward forestry.

Poster recognition	Attitude toward forestry			
	Excellent—good		Average—poor	
	No.	Per cent	No.	Per cent
Correct identifications	45	22.5	3	1.5
Incorrect identifications (includes no-response)	121	60.5	31	15.5
Total	166*	83.0	34	17.0

* Eight cases excluded because of incomplete responses to relevant items.

INTERPRETATION

These differential response patterns are interpreted as evidence supporting the existence of selective perception and selective retention. The findings appear to confirm the conclusions that have been reported in earlier studies; namely, the selective processes are empirically verifiable phenomena. This being the case, what is their function? It is suggested that the selective processes serve as ego-saving devices that unconsciously screen out messages that might be painful or disruptive to the personality.

What does this mean to the change agent? It suggests that he should not expect too much from the mass media, particularly if he wants change to occur. If, however, his aims are to reinforce existing opinions, success is more likely. By the same measure, however, it would be a mistake to think that attitudes are so highly developed that behavior patterns never change. They sometimes do. It is possible that sociologists' evaluations of mass media effectiveness have been unduly critical. Mass media messages do reach people. In Chestnut, where negative findings were anticipated, 49.5 per cent of the respondents *did* report they had seen the messages. Granted, the majority of these persons were already predisposed to agree with the messages; but some were not. A few of the correct poster identifications were made by persons whose responses were generally hostile toward fire control agencies.

Even so, it could be contended that changing a person's attitude

or behavior, as opposed to reinforcing his present attitudes, is probably beyond the scope of most mass media programs.

However, the change agent may have to choose between sending a message via the mass media, or sending no message at all. He may recognize the desirability of a face-to-face meeting in getting his message across, but he simply may not have the manpower necessary to personally reach significant segments of the population residing within his district.

In some instances social change can be brought about by concentrating upon those who are already favorable to a message; that is, by reinforcing their attitudes to such an extent that they will act in a specified manner. If selective exposure should prove to be a formidable barrier, perhaps the message could be reworked in such a way that resistance would be lowered and exposure rates raised. As an example, a change agent might emphasize the jobs and income that are provided by productive forests rather than keying his message to the reprehensible character of woods burners. In social psychological terms, such an approach mediates a message through existing attitudes.

Getting a message across to an audience requires a balanced information program. Face-to-face contact may be desirable in some situations and for certain messages; in other cases it may be impractical, or even undesirable. For example, diffusion studies indicate that the mass media are very effective in creating awareness of new ideas and innovations. If this is a project objective, mass media use is in order.

CONCLUSION

Accumulating scientific evidence supports the position that, in general, persons expose themselves to, perceive, and remember messages in a selective manner. The investigation that is reported in this paper tends to bear out these conclusions. Dominant community norms and attitudes appear to be significantly related to the perception and the retention of forest fire prevention messages. Furthermore, the relationship between incendiarism and perception-retention is interpreted as being an inverse relationship; perception-retention rates were found to be lower in Chestnut, the community with the higher incendiary rate. However, the selective processes should not be viewed as dead ends, as so often has happened. They are avenues through which messages can be mediated. The study would also urge caution for the change agent who tends to rely too heavily upon his message-sending ability. He cannot assume that what he

says will be understood and remembered the way he wants it to be.

Perhaps the words of Thoreau are more applicable to perception than Wordsworth's: "Many an object is not seen, though it falls within the range of our visual ray, because it does not come within the range of our intellectual ray. In other words, we are not looking for it. So—in the largest sense, we find only the world we look for."

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