

By Harvey K. Jacobson

Mass Media Believability: a Study of Receiver Judgments

Multivariate analysis of large N data on comparative believability of the media reveals subtle differences in their images; it also shows newspapers are seen as least objective, even by those who rate them most believable.

► The individual coming in contact with a mass medium is presented with two major sets of orientation objects—those from the context of the message (*how* it is said and *by whom*) and those from the content of the message (*what* is said). Interest in the “*by whom*” portion has elicited comments and studies on a variable frequently labeled “source credibility.”

On the practical level, the question of credibility often has arisen in connection with the degree of trust a democratic people places in the words of its government. Replying to “credibility gap” charges against the Johnson administration, the President’s deputy press secretary acknowledged the existence of such a gap, claimed the government was not alone in “being doubted,” and in turn charged the press with “misinterpretation via American news-

paper reporters, columnists, editors and broadcast commentators. . . . There is some doubt—growing doubt — [that Americans] believe what they read, what they hear [in the mass media].”¹

On the theoretical level “source credibility” is significant to communications research because of its bearing upon effects. The impact of a communication has long been assumed to depend to a considerable extent upon its source. Empirical research over the past four decades has documented this assumption.

Reviews of the literature of source credibility² reveal that investigations in this area are not without their limitations. A number of researchers have failed to obtain measurements of credibility at critical phases of their studies. Measurements often have been crude. Most studies either have assumed one source to have higher credibility than another or simply have defined the term operationally by asking subjects to rate sources on a single item such as “trustworthiness” or “expertness.” Thus, although many studies have been conducted on source credibility the investigations are of doubtful comparability,

¹ R. H. Fleming, “Frontiers of Presidential Coverage,” panel discussion at the R. O. Nafziger Symposium, School of Journalism, University of Wisconsin, May 13, 1966.

² See James B. Lemert, “Status Conferral: The Modification of Source Credibility by the Act of Press Coverage,” unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Michigan State University, 1964, pp 16-38; and Harvey K. Jacobson, “The Credibility of Three Mass Media as Information Sources,” unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Wisconsin, 1967, pp. 6-38.

► Dr. Jacobson is an associate professor of journalism at the University of North Dakota. The study reported here stems from the author’s Ph.D. dissertation written at the University of Wisconsin under the direction of Prof. Bruce H. Westley.

owing largely to the vagueness in the theoretical orientation and related confusion concerning components of credibility.

However, some degree of progress has been made. Rudimentary as it was, the theoretical orientation in the credibility studies of the Yale group³ was a starting point. More recently, Berlo, Lemert and Mertz have made considerable advances, conceptualizing credibility as a relational rather than a property term, conceiving of it as part of a broader judgment of the source and operationalizing it in terms of receiver perceptions.⁴ In the past credibility has typically been assumed to be unidimensional, dichotomous (either high or low) and specifiable in terms of objective characteristics of the source, such as social role. Such a stipulation has implied that the variable is a more or less static attribute of a source, rather than a receiver evaluation which is subject to change; such an approach has preclud-

ed consideration of the variable as a dependent outcome of communication.

While researchers have given extensive attention to credibility and its consequences, a minimum of attention has been devoted to the relative credibility of the mass media which carry the information. Roper's national surveys in 1959, 1961, 1963, 1964 and 1967 have asked which media the public most believes in as sources of news in the case of conflicting reports. Television replaced newspapers as the most believable medium in 1961, and has remained in first place since that time.⁵

Westley and Severin broke ground in relating media credibility to other variables in an effort to determine characteristics of people who choose one medium over another.⁶ They correlated more than 20 demographic, socio-economic and political variables with the comparative credibility of three media. Greenberg further pursued the isolation of correlates, limiting himself to three demographic variables and two media, and employing multivariate techniques.⁷

Not only have there been few studies on relative credibility, but many studies have all but ignored the distinction between the mass media and persons as sources. Experiments commonly deal with a single personal source as communicator. The typical mass communication, however, contains both internal and external sources, and Weiss, for one, has shown the need to distinguish between credibility effects of an internal source, e.g., a person originating a message, and an external source, e.g., a mass medium transmitting a message.⁸ Sargent has revealed essential differences in the way personal news sources are received as compared with impersonal sources.⁹

With the possible exception of analysis of the "ethical dimension" in the image studies,¹⁰ investigations generally have failed to direct themselves to comparisons of perceived credibility attributes across mass media. A modest be-

³ Carl I. Hovland, Irving L. Janis and Harold H. Kelly, *Communication and Persuasion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953).

⁴ David K. Berlo, James B. Lemert and Robert Mertz, "Dimensions for Evaluating the Acceptability of Message Sources," Department of Communication, Michigan State University (undated mimeo). The theoretical approach to credibility used here is similar to that of Berlo, Lemert and Mertz and regards credibility as a convenient label only.

⁵ Burns W. Roper, *Emerging Profiles of Television and Other Mass Media: Public Attitudes, 1959-1967* (New York: Television Information Office, April 1967).

⁶ Bruce H. Westley and Werner Severin, "Some Correlates of Media Credibility," *JOURNALISM QUARTERLY*, 41:323-35 (Summer 1964).

⁷ Bradley S. Greenberg, "Media Use and Believability: Some Multiple Correlates," *JOURNALISM QUARTERLY*, 43:665-70 (Winter 1966).

⁸ Walter Weiss, "Opinion Congruence with a Negative Source on an Issue as a Factor Influencing Agreement on Another Issue," *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 52:109-14 (1956).

⁹ L. W. Sargent, "Communicator Image and News Reception," *JOURNALISM QUARTERLY*, 42:35-42 (Winter 1965).

¹⁰ P. H. Tannenbaum and J. M. McLeod, "Public Images of Mass Media Institutions," in Wayne Danielson, ed., *Paul Deutschmann Memorial Papers*, (Cincinnati: Scripps Howard Research, December 1963), pp. 51-60.

gining has been made by Carter and Greenberg, whose report of a methodological study included a short summary of reasons for media preferences when news accounts disagree.¹¹ Television seemed to gain support because of its visual dimension, and data suggested a possible distinction between "sins of commission" in newspapers (respondents thought accounts were "exaggerated," "opinionated," "magnified") and "sins of omission" in television (lack of completeness of account.)

The research reported in this paper attempts to gain further insight into the relative believability of the mass media, focusing on comparative perceptions of media as news sources. Cognitive aspects of information processing are of considerable significance in the study of communications effects because interference in individual filtering mechanisms may be regarded as psychological noise that prevents the receiver from obtaining an unbiased sample of the message. After sorting out respondents according to their selection of the most believable medium, the study examines receivers' connotative judgments of three media, comparing the most believable medium with the two competing media. Determination of characteristics utilized to distinguish between sources helps to identify reasons why the respondent relies on his chosen medium.

Method

The data analyzed here were obtained in a sample survey of Wisconsin adults conducted in 1966 by the Wisconsin Survey Research Laboratory.¹² The survey used a multi-stage, area probability sample design. Of the 747 total possible respondents, 627 (84%) completed interview forms for analysis. The measuring instruments were a single-question ordinal measurement of believability and a multidimensional index of credibility and non-credibility judgments of media as news sources.

References to believability in this report signify the relative believability of the information media imputed to them by respondents. Believability is defined operationally as answers to the following question:

If you got conflicting or different reports of the same news story from radio, television and the newspapers, which of the three versions would you be the most inclined to believe—the one on radio, the one on television, or the one in the newspaper, and which one would be second?

A multidimensional measure of 20 adjectival opposites, adapted primarily from the media image studies of Tannenbaum and McLeod¹³ and the factor analytical work of Lemert,¹⁴ was employed as a measurement of connotative meaning to isolate basic receiver gratifications supplied by three media news sources—radio, television and newspapers.

This Judgment of the Source Index consisted of 20 scales: *accurate-inaccurate, exciting-dull, fresh-stale, open-minded-closeminded, convenient-inconvenient, clear-hazy, impersonal-personal, easy-difficult, permanent-temporary, loud-soft, colorful-colorless, complete-incomplete, active-passive, trustworthy-untrustworthy, bold-timid, pleasant-unpleasant, relaxed-tense, unbiased-biased, expert-ignorant, important-unimportant*. A factor analysis of data collected on the index produced two credibility di-

¹¹ Richard F. Carter and Bradley S. Greenberg, "Newspapers and Television: Which Do You Believe?" JOURNALISM QUARTERLY, 42:29-34 (Winter 1965).

¹² The author wishes to express his gratitude to Dr. Harry Sharp, director, and the staff of the Wisconsin Survey Research Laboratory, which collected the data, and to the University of Wisconsin Computing Center, which provided the author machine time and technical assistance under a grant from the Graduate Research Committee. The Laboratory is supported in part by the Wisconsin Alumni Research Foundation and the National Science Foundation. The author also acknowledges the assistance of the University of North Dakota Computer Center for more recent analyses of the data.

¹³ *Op. cit.*

¹⁴ James B. Lemert, "Dimensions of Source Credibility," unpublished report presented to Association for Education in Journalism, University of Nebraska, August 1963.

mensions, Factor I (Authenticity) and II (Objectivity), and two non-credibility dimensions, Factor III (Dynamism) and IV (Respite). The common factors were established after determining the four factors accounting for the most variance.¹⁵

Authenticity was made up of *trustworthy-untrustworthy*, *accurate-inaccurate*, *expert-ignorant* and *openminded-closeminded*. Objectivity was made up of *unbiased-biased* and *impersonal-personal*. Dynamism was made up of *colorful-colorless*, *important-unimportant*, *easy-difficult* and *bold-timid*. Respite consisted of *relaxed-tense* and *pleasant-unpleasant*. The total N of 627 was reduced to 535 for a portion of the study, since 92 persons interviewed responded inadequately to the Judgment of the Source Index.

Data were first analyzed for comparative believability of the three media, as determined by responses to the question on conflicting reports. Next, respondents were divided into four groups on the basis of their rankings of the media on the believability item. The groups were: Television Believers, respondents who named television as first choice; Newspaper Believers, respondents who named newspapers as first choice; Radio Believers, respondents who named radio as first choice, and Non-Believers, respondents who answered "Don't Know" or "Depends." Groups were then compared as to Judgment of the Source ratings on each of the three news media, using factor scores to determine which dimensions respondents employed to distinguish between media.

¹⁵ Details on the factor analyses and procedures for establishing common factors are presented in Jacobson, *op. cit.*, pp. 94-112.

¹⁶ The next most recent Roper study, conducted in 1964 and reported in Roper, *op. cit.*, also listed television as most believable (41%), followed by newspapers (23%), magazines (10%) and radio (8%), with 18 per cent giving no answer or "Don't Know."

¹⁷ G. A. Ferguson, *Statistical Analysis in Psychology and Education* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1959), p. 138.

Results

Comparative Believability. Respondents (N=627) regarded television as most believable (46%) followed by newspapers (31%) and radio (11%). The remainder answered "Don't Know" (7%) or "Depends" (5%). These findings are quite similar to the results of a recent national survey by Roper and Associates (January 1967), which found television most believable (41%), followed by newspapers (24%), magazines (8%) and radio (7%). Twenty per cent of the Roper sample gave no answer or said "Don't Know."¹⁶ It should be noted that a fourth medium, magazines, was among the choices in the question used in the Roper study.

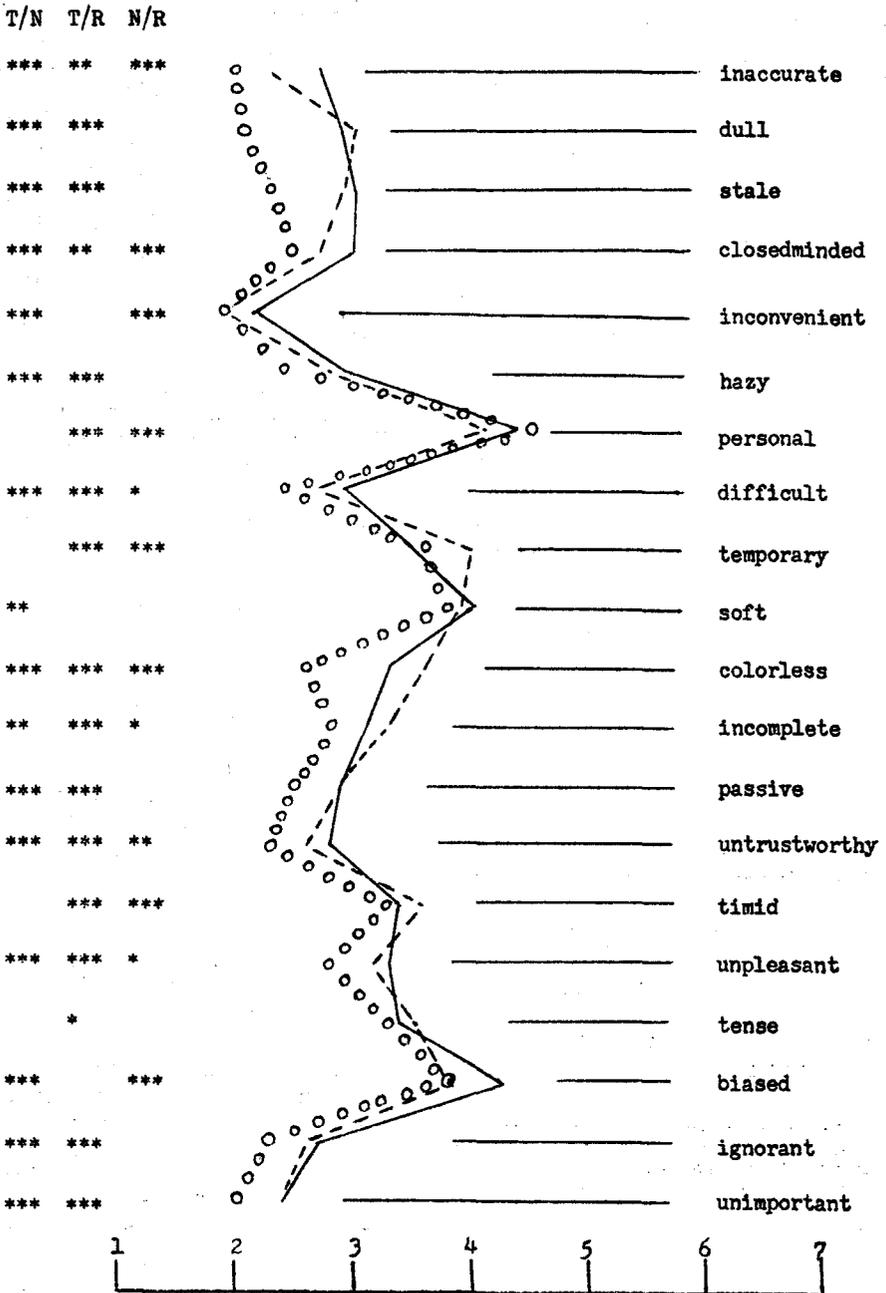
Comparison of Profiles. Figure 1 shows judgments of three concepts on the 20 scales. The three profiles are based upon the computation of means of 535 individual ratings for each scale for each concept, the concepts being radio, television and newspapers as sources of news.

The statistical significance shown is based upon the computation of *t*-tests for correlated samples.¹⁷

The profiles show that the respondents do indeed perceive media differences. For example, the respondents find that television is significantly more *accurate* than newspapers and that radio is significantly more *accurate* than newspapers.

All 20 scales differentiated between at least two media. Recorded at the left of Figure 1 are 45 significant differences, which testifies to the advantages of such a measuring instrument. The original Roper believability question is limited, of course, in that it does not ask the respondent *how much* difference he perceives between media or for that matter if there is any significant difference at all. Responses on a 7-point interval scale, however, permit the pinpointing of public attitudes toward the media. See, for example, the *biased-unbiased* scale in Figure 1. If there are those who doubt whether a mass me-

FIGURE 1
Ratings of Media as Sources of News
N=535



* p <.05
 ** <.01
 *** <.001

o o o o o Television (T)
 ——— Newspaper (N)
 - - - Radio (R)

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dium is capable of introducing bias as it mediates, the results here should give pause. If the public regarded the media as being extremely unbiased carriers of news, a mean of 1.00 would have resulted. Instead the means fell at 3.79 for radio and television, and 4.32 for newspapers. Respondents considered newspapers significantly less unbiased than radio and television.

In other words, when the public evaluates newspapers, the mean resides slightly on the *bias* side. This finding is in accord with results obtained in the study of Wisconsin newspapers by Tannenbaum and Greenberg which revealed that when 21 semantic differential scales were rated the lone mean to fall on the negative side was that on the *unbiased-biased* scale.¹⁸ Likewise, when Sargent's subjects rated a newspaper, a magazine and a broadcasting network on a *prejudiced-impartial* scale, each source wound up on the *prejudiced* side.¹⁹

The largest distance between profiles on any single scale is on *colorful-colorless*, with television (2.62) being judged a full scale point more colorful than radio.

Somewhat surprising are the results on the *complete-incomplete* scale. Television as a news source (2.83) was seen not only significantly more complete than radio (3.30) but also significantly more complete than newspapers (3.11).

Between-Media Comparison of Judgments, By Factors. Since space does not allow scale-by-scale comparisons of media judgments, comparisons reported here are made by factors, a practice which permits parsimonious presentation.

Table 1 shows the judgments of believer groups on four factors. Each mean reported is the mean judgment for the group on a particular factor, e.g., with 1 indicating a judgment of ex-

remely Authentic and 7, extremely Unauthentic. The most positive rating in the entire table is the 2.09 accorded Television by Television Believers on Factor I, Authenticity. The most negative rating is the 4.81 given to Newspapers by Radio Believers on Factor II, Objectivity.

Radio Believers, those respondents who picked radio as the most believable news source in case of conflicting reports, consider radio to be significantly more Authentic and Objective than newspapers but perceive no significant difference between the two electronic media on any of the four factors. Radio Believers find the newspapers to be significantly less Authentic and Objective than television.

Newspaper Believers, those who rate newspapers as the most believable medium, consider newspapers to be significantly more Authentic and Dynamic than radio, but significantly less Objective than radio. Likewise, they find newspapers to be significantly less Objective than television and also significantly less Dynamic than television. Comparing the electronic media, they consider television to be significantly more Dynamic and also a significantly greater source of Respite than radio.

Television Believers register a greater number of significant differences than any other group. They feel that television as a news source is significantly more Authentic than both radio and newspapers, significantly more Objective than newspapers, significantly more Dynamic than both radio and newspapers, and a significantly greater source of Respite than both radio and newspapers. Comparing radio and newspapers, they regard radio to be significantly more Authentic and Objective.

Non-Believers, the group that answered "Don't Know" or "Depends" when asked about the most believable news source, find the following significant differences between the three media: Radio and television are both

¹⁸ P. H. Tannenbaum and Bradley S. Greenberg, *Newspaper Image Study*, First Report, ditto, Mass Communications Research Center, University of Wisconsin, May 1961.

¹⁹ *Op. cit.*

TABLE 1
Judgments of Believer Groups
(N=535)

Factors	Means			t		
	Radio	Newspaper	Television	Radio/Newspaper	Radio/TV	Newspaper/TV
RADIO BELIEVERS						
n=53						
I	2.32	3.12	2.49	-4.57***	-1.21	4.05***
II	4.04	4.81	4.29	-3.97***	-1.13	2.54*
III	2.88	3.11	2.86	-1.68	.10	1.78
IV	3.33	3.43	3.41	-.52	-.37	.13
NEWSPAPER BELIEVERS						
n=166						
I	2.53	2.32	2.41	3.37***	1.66	-1.18
II	3.76	4.20	3.97	-4.12***	-1.91	2.05*
III	3.00	2.71	2.56	4.03***	5.47***	2.11*
IV	3.30	3.10	3.04	1.78	2.32*	.50
TELEVISION BELIEVERS						
n=254						
I	2.54	2.92	2.09	-5.02***	8.48***	11.34***
II	4.12	4.38	4.20	-3.17**	-.87	2.29*
III	3.22	3.14	2.56	1.23	10.00***	8.92***
IV	3.35	3.53	2.88	-1.86	5.00***	6.71***
NON-BELIEVERS						
n=62						
I	2.60	3.15	2.53	-5.18***	.68	5.45***
II	3.67	4.13	4.15	-3.59***	-3.28**	-.10
III	2.97	2.97	2.57	-.03	3.50***	4.31***
IV	3.23	3.38	3.21	-.91	.19	1.08

* <.05

** <.01

*** <.001

Note: Factors are I, Authenticity; II, Objectivity; III, Dynamism; IV, Respite.

more Authentic than newspapers, radio is more Objective than both newspapers and television and television is more Dynamic than both newspapers and radio.

Discussion

Television, with 46% of the response, continues to outdistance its nearest rival, newspapers, as the most believable news source. The finding in this study, based on a one-state sample, is entirely in keeping with the recent findings in national samples of the Roper organization.²⁰

On the whole, public evaluations of the media are quite favorable. Scale

ratings fall almost exclusively on the positive side.

As for measuring instruments, the utility of the Judgment of the Source Index is obvious. An illustration of the value of sensitivity combined with multidimensionality is provided by the Newspaper Believers, who judged newspapers to be significantly *more* Authentic than radio, but at the same time significantly *less* Objective than radio.

In the cross-media comparisons, one of the more interesting findings is that respondents consider television news to be more complete than news presented in newspapers. Why? Answers could be

²⁰ *Op. cit.*

sought through research in single vs. multiple-channel communication. The newspaper is a single-channel, visual-modality medium, whereas television is two-channel, with visual and auditory modalities. Does the number of modalities contribute to the difference in completeness? Or does the type of modality give unique advantages? Is television less abstracted from reality, giving the receiver a greater sense of participation? Does increased realism increase the believability of the message? According to some, orthographic communication is twice abstracted from reality, once from reality to the verbal mode, then from the verbal to the orthographic. One investigator has defined realism as the degree to which all relevant sense data about an event are conveyed in a communication—and its fidelity to the event.²¹ In terms of the receiver, the more sense modalities involved, the greater the realism. In terms of the message, the more dimensions or channels involved, the greater the realism. It could be that television news, presented with sound, pictures in motion and even color, outclasses other media in simulating reality for the receiver.

Another interesting finding indicates that respondents who choose the newspaper as the most believable medium nonetheless rate newspapers as being significantly less Objective than television and radio. This result could be interpreted to mean that some respondents want bias in the medium which

carries news to them, presumably especially if the bias coincides with theirs.

This finding is provocative when related to results obtained by McLeod, *et al.*, and Brehm and Lipsher.²² Pursuing the idea that people seek communication that is consonant with their attitudes and behavior, the McLeod team found it "striking how strongly this appears to operate in the choice of a newspaper when the public is given a choice" between newspapers in a city with two dailies of opposing political views. Seventy-nine per cent of the respondents in their survey chose the consonant newspaper, i.e., the one supporting their political party, far above the 54% who would do so by chance. Brehm and Lipsher found that the greater the difference in opinion between the receiver and the source, the greater the likelihood that the source is perceived as untrustworthy by the individual concerned. In other words, the closer the value system of the source is perceived to be to the value system of the receiver, the more trustworthy is the source in the judgment of the receiver.

Results of the present study lend support to the findings of Carter and Greenberg, who maintain that television and radio both show substantial support for believability because of the bias perceived in newspaper accounts.²³ Both Television Believers and Radio Believers regard newspapers to be significantly less Objective than their most believable medium, yet both the Television and Radio Believers find no difference in the Objectivity of television and radio.

Various observers have speculated that the newspaper is distrusted because it has frequently taken editorial positions which differ from those of the reader, while television and radio have engaged in editorializing to a considerably lesser degree. According to statistics presented by broadcasting spokesmen the practice of editorializing by electronic media is increasing, and the public sentiment for editorializing is in-

²¹ Lionel C. Barrow, Jr., "Proposed Theory for the Effect of Educational Television," in Wilbur Schramm, ed., *The Impact of Educational Television* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1960), pp. 229-47.

²² Jack M. McLeod, D. B. Wackman, W. H. Hurt and H. W. Payne, "Political Conflict and Communication Behavior in the 1964 Political Campaign," unpublished paper presented at the convention of the Association for Education in Journalism, Syracuse, New York, August 1965; J. W. Brehm and D. M. Lipsher, "Communicator-Communicatee Discrepancy and Perceived Trustworthiness," *Journal of Personality*, 27:352-61 (1959).

²³ *Op. cit.*

creasing.²⁴ If the practice grows more common, and if the broadcast editorials make inroads on the public consciousness, what effect will this have on the credibility of the electronic media?

Inquiry is needed on the process by which mass media institutions introduce bias as they mediate. Coverage of a news event is a selective process and the act of coverage presents an implicit, if not explicit, message about the content. In addition to explicit assertions about concepts in editorials, media issue implicit assertions by the act of coverage, by emphasis, deletion and other treatment of content. Future research could pursue the matter of explicit and implicit assertions in media to determine the sophistication of receivers in detecting each and the relative weights that are assigned.

Do newspaper readers distinguish between a newspaper's "opinion function"

and "news function"? Attitude studies on this point would be enlightening.

Meanwhile, until further studies are reported, it would seem that media personnel and journalism educators might well continue to guard against the danger of preserving the "illusion of objectivity" in the mass media.²⁵ If the value system of a communicator shows through his message, and if opinion creeps into news presentation by placement, selection and other manipulation, it would seem more realistic to consider receiver judgment as taking place along an objective-subjective continuum than in a fact-opinion dichotomy.

²⁴ V. T. Wasilewski, "A Report from Vincent T. Wasilewski, President of the National Association of Broadcasters, to the NAB Fall Conferences," unpublished mimeographed report (Washington, D. C.: National Association of Broadcasters, October 24, 1966).

²⁵ Gerhart Wiebe, "Mass Communications," in E. L. Hartley and R. E. Hartley, eds., *Fundamentals of Social Psychology* (New York: Knopf, 1952), pp. 159-95.

The Printed Page — Never Redundant

► I do not think television is simply concerned with bare surfaces. Television can communicate something of the feel of events and life, something of the experience. It can involve. . . .

It leaves newspapers with the job, not so much of involving, as considering. And that is why I feel the printed page can never become redundant. The art of considering will always be done best on paper; the audience will always receive it best by reading. Not just the stocks and shares, the crossword, the sporting results. These could well be transmitted onto pre-programmed home sets which delivered a paper overnight into the drawing room instead of into a mail box at the bottom of the garden.

But the paper's duty will be of analyzing, studying, communicating the quality of life, its complexity, its problems, and always readably, and without waffle. As the world grows smaller, and technology greater, man feels more and more lost, more and more looking on at developments beyond his control. Bureaucracy grows, government grows, disaffection grows. . . .

The newspaper will always have the special function of bridging the gap between man and man and man and his environment, constantly questioning, constantly communicating.—DENIS HAMILTON, editor-in-chief and chief executive of Times Newspapers Limited, London, at the fourth annual Press-Enterprise Lecture, Riverside, California.