a Pelican Book

Communications

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'a most valuable book for anyone concerned with the state of the chief means of communication in this country – television, films, theatre, advertising, books and magazines'

–Tribune

CHAPTER TWO

HISTORY

THE printed book is the first great means of modern communication. Writing had made possible the recording of communication; printing made possible its rapid distribution. In England there were two or three printers in 1500, but by 1600 more than ninety. Thirteen titles were printed in 1510, but by 1600 an annual average of about 150. The printing of ballads, almanacs, and pamphlets also increased at a rapid rate. In the seventeenth century the ordinary edition of a book was about 2,000 copies, while a popular almanac sold an average of 16,000 copies.

Between 1500 and 1700 many attempts to regulate printing were made by the State. A form of censorship was set up in 1538; the number of printing houses was several times limited by patent; offending authors were liable to prosecution. These measures fluctuated with a changing political history. As printing moved towards the newspaper, severe measures were taken. In 1662 a Licensing Act limited the number of printers, to prevent 'abuses', and in 1663 a Surveyor of the Press was appointed, with a virtual monopoly in printed news. Parliament's refusal to renew this Licensing Act in 1695 led to a rapid expansion of newspapers and magazines. The history of communications from 1700 until our own century is largely the history of the Press. From the slowly improving postal services to the coming of railways and telegrams, this expansion was dependent on general communications. The use of steam printing, from 1814, decisively raised the rate of distribution, and the effect of subsequent changes in printing, including major changes now taking place, is profound.

By the early nineteenth century, the annual sale of newspapers was about twenty-four million, and some 580 books were published each year, in ordinary editions of about 1,000. Between 1700 and 1820, however, there had been repeated attempts, in new forms, to control what was printed. There was extensive Government bribery of journalists, and certain compliant newspapers were subsidized. Direct State control was replaced by forms of market tax: the Stamp Duty, on every newspaper page, and the Advertisement Tax. These were not to raise revenue but to 'suppress libels'. Starting at a halfpenny in the early eighteenth century, Stamp Duty had risen to fourpence by 1815, the steep rise mainly in the later years, in direct relation to the growth of radical opinion. Independent journalists fought back, even after the further imposition, in 1819, of formal Acts directly aimed at suppressing freedom of expression.

After the Reform Bill of 1832, the situation changed. The tax on advertisements was reduced in 1833 and abolished in 1853. Stamp Duty was reduced in 1836 and abolished in 1855. These developments, aided by the growth of steam printing and railways, led to a further and more rapid expansion. Sales of newspapers rose by 33 per cent between 1816 and 1836, by 70 per cent between 1836 and 1856, and by some 600 per cent between 1856 and 1882. From the 1830s, the new Sunday newspapers, dealing mainly in reports of crime and sensational fiction, took a lead over daily newspapers which they have never lost. By 1850 the daily papers were being read by one adult in eighty, the Sunday papers by one adult in twenty. By 1900 the daily papers were read by one adult in five or six, the Sunday papers by one adult in three. There was a comparable expansion in the reading of magazines, and a slower expansion in the reading of books. The annual production of some 580 books in 1810 had become 2,600 in the 1850s and reached 6,000 by 1901. Editions had become larger and prices were lower.

We must now turn to another line of development, in the theatre and in forms of entertainment. The first theatres were built in England in the 1570s, but there had been a popular drama before this, in the guild plays – miracles and moralities – performed at festivals in the streets and market-places. Beside these, there was a body of popular entertainment, given by travelling professional performers, at fairs and similar occasions, often with difficulty from the law which normally treated them as rogues and vagabonds. The importance of the new theatres of the 1570s was that some of these professionals at last found a home, though the theatres remained under constant pressure from the authorities, and the companies had to seek patronage and protection to survive. Over forty years (then declining before the Puritan closures of the 1640s) there was a remarkable cultural growth, in which the professional actors and the new professional dramatists found a popular audience. Other forms of professional entertainment continued under the usual difficulties.

When the theatres were reopened, in 1660, there was a new kind of division. There were to be only two Royal Patent Theatres, and these were to have a monopoly of what thus came to be called 'legitimate' drama. Other kinds of professional entertainer had survived, and in the eighteenth century, while many continued to tour the fairs, others found their way into new kinds of theatre – the 'illegitimate' world of pantomime, spectacle, and variety. The monopoly of the Patent Theatres was not broken until as late as 1843. It had done much to enforce the idea of two separate traditions of performance, one 'art' and one 'entertainment'. Yet the dividing line had never been clear, and there had been some expansion of theatres.

In 1600, at the height of the Elizabethan drama, there were at least six theatres in London. In 1700, after the narrowing of the Restoration, there were only two. By 1750, five

London theatres and five in the provinces had grown up alongside the Patent Theatres, and by 1800 the number in the provinces had reached forty. By 1850 there were twenty-one theatres in London, and seventy-five in the provinces. The real expansion came between 1850 and 1900, and at the end of it there were sixty-three theatres in London and more than 300 in the provinces. Moreover, from the 1840s music-halls had been appearing, developing out of casual entertainment in drinking places. There were forty music-halls by 1900, mainly carrying on parts of the old 'illegitimate' tradition, but now with such new features as high-pressure publicity campaigns and fantastic salaries, and with some new and valuable developments in variety. The old market fairs declined in importance, but the menagerie and the 'horse-riding' developed, by the last quarter of the nineteenth century, into the circus. In the same period, football and racing became parts of organized entertainment, with regular meetings, charges for admission, and many more spectators.

In the 1890s a further series of changes began to appear. In 1896 the first wireless patent was registered and the first cinema show in England took place, later transferring to run in a music-hall. The full effect of the wireless and the cinema did not become apparent until the 1920s, but meanwhile there were very important changes in the organization of the Press. The 'Northcliffe Revolution', as it is usually called, was not the invention of popular journalism; this had begun as early as the Sunday papers of the 1830s and perhaps before. The crucial change made by Northcliffe was in the economic organization of the Press.

Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the newspapers had relied, to varying degrees, on some income from advertising. This was at its highest point of importance in the mid eighteenth century, and at its lowest in the second half of the nineteenth century. Such advertisement was

mainly of the kind we now call 'classified': specific individual notices. But, outside the Press, other kinds of advertising had been rapidly developing. In its early days it was closely connected with fairs and in particular with the travellers selling patent medicines. Their methods got into print, partly through the newspapers, but more commonly through bills and posters. In the early and middle years of the nineteenth century billposting became a large and organized trade. All kinds of buildings were used, often without consent, and eventually in 1862 special hoardings were organized by the Billposters' Association. Handbills were still given out in extraordinary numbers in the streets, and men and vehicles were hired to parade boards and displays. These became so many that in 1853 the men were officially confined to the gutters and the vehicles were forbidden. New developments followed: skyline and balloon advertisements, larger posters on the new hoardings, electric signs. At last, from the 1880s, the new kinds of display advertising began to break into the Press, at a time when changes in marketing and the development of the retail trade were changing the whole basis of advertising. Northcliffe and similar figures saw increased revenue from the new display advertising as the key to modern newspaper finance, and in particular as a means to reduction in price per copy so as to gain a large circulation. He published his own circulation figures, and challenged his rivals to do the same. The new-style advertising agencies supported this challenge, which was not finally successful until 1931. By this time the whole structure of the nineteenth-century Press had been radically altered. The typical nineteenth-century newspaper, while using advertising revenue, was in no way dependent on it. The typical twentieth-century newspaper became heavily dependent on advertising revenue to the extent of just under a half of all revenue in the popular newspapers, and some three-quarters of all revenue in the traditional minority newspapers. If, in these different classes

of advertising, sufficient revenue cannot be obtained, the typical commercial newspaper is now closed down.

A second part of this major reorganization was the development of groups or chains of newspapers and magazines. The typical form of ownership in the nineteenth century had been by a printer, a printing family, or a small company. It was rare for more than one paper to be owned by the same person or company. But the new kind of owner, such as Northcliffe, Pearson, and Newnes, built up groups of magazines and then went on to start or acquire newspapers. This process has continued all through this century, and newspapers and magazines have nearly all passed from their previous status as independent private enterprises to membership of these new kinds of capitalist combine.

In recent years this process has been accelerating. There seem certain to be further changes, but in 1965 seven out of eight copies of all national morning papers were controlled by three groups (Beaverbrook, King, Rothermere), while seven out of eight copies of national Sunday papers were controlled by two of these groups (Beaverbrook and King) and a third (*News of the World*). The two London evening papers are controlled by Beaverbrook and Rothermere. A substantial part of the provincial Press belongs to four groups: Rothermere, Thomson, Cowdray, and Drayton. The King group, which controls two out of five copies of all national daily and Sunday papers, has also a virtual monopoly of all large-circulation women's magazines, is the largest single owner of technical and trade journals, and in all controls more than 300 publications.

The expansion of readership in this century has been great. By 1920 one adult in two read a daily paper, while every four adults read five Sunday papers. By 1947, every ten adults read twelve daily papers and twenty-three Sunday papers. At the same time the range of papers available has steadily declined. Where there were nine evening papers in

the London area at the end of the nineteenth century there are now only two. Five national daily or Sunday papers have been closed down since the beginning of 1960, and seven provincial morning papers have been closed in the last fifteen years. By comparison with 1900 there is a vastly expanded total readership and a seriously limited range of choice. It is worth pointing out that the papers which have been closed usually had substantial circulations; even very large circulations by all earlier standards. The last available figures for the five national papers which have been closed show sales of over two million (*Empire News*), one and a half million (*Dispatch*), and over one million each (*News Chronicle*, *Graphic*, *Sunday Chronicle*). Such figures show that it cannot be said that these papers had to close because people would not buy them. It is rather that, in modern Press finance, such high actual figures are not high enough to attract the necessary amounts of advertising revenue. Papers with much lower circulations, such as *The Times* and the *Guardian* (about a quarter of a million each), survive because the nature of their readership (people with higher incomes and more social influence) enables them to get advertising revenue at higher rates. So the position is that newspapers do not survive or fail according to how many people want them, but according to their suitability as media for advertising. This is a distinctive feature of this large part of communications in twentieth-century Britain.

The theatre has been steadily declining in the same period. The 400 theatres and music-halls in the country in 1900 have declined to some 200, and the decline is continuing. An important part of this decline is due to competition from cinemas, which created in their turn a new and very large audience. By 1939, the cinema audience in Britain was nineteen million people a week, and by 1946 over thirty-one million. Since the end of the war there has been a decline, rapidly accelerated by the coming of television. By 1956 the

weekly audience was down to twenty-one million, by 1959 to eleven and a half million, and by 1964 to eight million. During this post-war decline, more than a half of all cinemas have been closed. In 1952 there were 4,609 cinemas open, in 1959 some 3,450, in 1965 some 2,056. Closures are continuing.

The expansion of the theatre in the nineteenth century, and of the cinema in the twentieth century, show certain common features. In the early phase, in each case, typical ownership was by a small speculator, who gradually built up a local group. In later phases, combines similar to those which emerged in the Press began to be established, especially in the London theatre, in chains of provincial halls, and in the large cinema circuits. In the cinema there has been closely interlocking ownership of both the distributing and the production sides. In decline, both theatres and cinemas have been treated as ordinary commercial property, and have often been closed as part of speculative property schemes.

The characteristic form of ownership of the means of communication in twentieth-century Britain was set aside when broadcasting began to be developed. Perhaps because of its implications for national security, the early development of broadcasting was soon taken over by a public authority from the original trade combine. In 1927 a Royal Charter established the B.B.C. as an independent public corporation, with monopoly rights. This charter was renewed in 1937, and then covered the early development of television. The first public television service had been established by the B.B.C. in 1936. In 1954 the television monopoly was broken, and a second authority, I.T.A., set up by Act of Parliament. The Independent Television Authority owns its means of transmission, but contracts for the provision of programmes with some thirteen companies. Where the B.B.C. draws its revenue from a proportion of receiving licence fees, the I.T.A. is maintained by payments from the programme companies, which obtain their own revenue from selling advertising time. Thus, by

the middle nineteen-fifties, a form very similar to that which had emerged in the Press could be discerned in what became the majority television service. A major part of revenue is derived from advertising, on which the programme companies, like newspapers, are dependent. The element of control by I.T.A., and by the terms of the Act establishing it, is a differentiating factor. It is significant, in terms of the general situation, that much of the investment in the programme companies has been by the existing newspaper combines, and by similar groups in the theatre and the cinema. There has been a powerful recent campaign to extend this system, with its dependence on advertising revenue, to sound broadcasting.

The growth of audiences, in sound and television, has been spectacular. Between twenty and twenty-five million people watch television each day. The great majority of families have wireless sets, and more than ninety per cent of the population have television in their homes. Audiences for particular programmes are the largest ever known in the history of our communications. An important result of broadcasting has been a notable increase in audiences for musical concerts, and more recently there has been an enormous development in the distribution of records of all kinds, more than seventy-eight million records being produced in Britain in 1964.

In books, also, there has been a major expansion. By 1901 the number of annual titles produced had reached 6,000. By 1924 it was over 12,000, by 1937 over 17,000, and in 1963 it was a total of 26,023, of which 20,367 were first editions. Library facilities have been greatly expanded, and there are now some 460 million loans a year in the Public Library service. The rapidly extending production of paperbacks has greatly increased the number of actual sales, the sale of paperbacks alone having increased from twenty million to more than eighty million a year, between the mid-1950s and

the mid-1960s. In general, rather more than fifteen books a year are read per head of population. The actual book-reading public seems to be nearly sixty per cent of the population (of course with great unevenness as to actual use). This majority public for books was probably first achieved in the 1950s, by comparison with a majority public for Sunday papers by 1910 and for daily papers by the end of the First World War.

The production of books seems to be undergoing similar changes of ownership to those noted for the Press at the end of the nineteenth century. There are still many independent publishers, but there is also a marked tendency towards combine ownership, and already a considerable number of apparently independent imprints have been absorbed into large publishing groups.

What can we learn from this general record? It is clear that there are two major factors in the modern history of communications. There is, first, the remarkable expansion of audiences. In newspapers, magazines, books, broadcasting, television, and recorded music there has been an expansion beyond any previous conception, and this is still continuing. The recent decline in the cinema audience still leaves a very large public, and the decline in the theatre can be offset by this expansion, and especially by the great increase in audiences for drama through broadcasting and television. The whole process has the effect of a cultural revolution.

At the same time, there has been another major development. The ownership of the means of communication, old and new, has passed or is passing, in large part, to a kind of financial organization unknown in earlier periods, and with important resemblances to the major forms of ownership in general industrial production. The methods and attitudes of capitalist business have established themselves near the centre of communications. There is the widespread dependence on advertising money, which leads to a policy of

getting a large audience as quickly as possible, to attract and hold advertisers. From this it becomes one of the major purposes of communication to sell a particular paper or programme. All the basic purposes of communication – the sharing of human experience – can become subordinated to this drive to sell.

The pressure here is actually increasing. The old kind of newspaper proprietor, who wanted control so that he could propagate his opinions, is being replaced by a kind of proprietor who says he is not interested in opinions but simply in selling as many papers as he can. What was once a means to some larger policy has become in many cases the policy itself. The organization of communications is then not for use, but for profit, and we seem to have passed the stage in which there has to be any pretence that things are otherwise.

This emphasis inevitably extends into the substance of communication. It is bound to remain a human world, in some form; it can never be only the production of things. But methods learned from the selling of things can be applied to persons. There can be a kind of manufacture and marketing of personalities, as in the powerful and expanding world of publicity. There can also be a kind of packaging of experience: putting it out with the right gloss, or even making the gloss a substitute for the experience. The human effects of such tendencies are bound to be serious, but attention to them can be dismissed as 'idealism' while the emphasis on selling is seen as normal and practical. The irony is that the only practical use of communication is the sharing of real experience. To set anything above this is in fact quite unpractical. To set selling above it may seem normal, but is really only a perversion to which some people have got used: a way of looking at the world which must be right and normal because you have cut yourself down to its size.

The interaction between these two major processes – the popular expansion and the emphasis on selling – is extremely

complicated. The two are tied together in our minds, because they happened together. It is difficult to see that things might have been otherwise, can still be otherwise.

The correct historical analysis is twofold. First, it is clear that the extension of communications has been part of the extension of democracy. Yet, in this century, while the public has extended, ownership and control of the means of communication have narrowed. There is fear of public control because of the memories of State control in the past, but control can be of many kinds. In the modern combine system there is a new kind of control, and we might agree with Burke that

> Wise men will apply their remedies to vices, not to names . . . Otherwise you will be wise historically, a fool in practice . . . You are terrifying yourself with ghosts and apparitions, whilst your house is the haunt of robbers.

In the modern trend towards limited ownership, the cultural conditions of democracy are in fact being denied: sometimes, ironically, in the name of freedom.

Second, it is clear that the expansion has been and is a process of human growth. All growth is difficult, and needs time and care. Many kinds of confusion and uncertainty are inevitably encountered. If the attempt is made to preserve old forms intact, and to denounce the new in their name, the old forms simply become irrelevant to the new problems. What can then happen is that control of the new forms passes to men who are not interested in the growth of the society, or in the human purposes the expansion is serving. Such men will see inexperience as an opportunity, and confusion as a sanction. Instead of a new culture emerging, a synthetic culture – meeting and exploiting the tensions of growth – will be devised for a quick sale. While such men rule, there will indeed be expansion but there will be no real growth.

A synthetic culture is easy. An old culture is remote. We

are caught in this tension, yet the forces of growth, the real drives of the expansion, cannot in the end be denied. Already, through many difficulties, there has been growth of a real and valuable kind. But the nature of the expansion warns us that we cannot apply any simple overall test. We have to recognize the contradictions we have been following: between democracy and limited ownership; between genuine extension and the drive to sell. The real history of communications, in showing us the contradictions, shows us also the need to choose between genuinely alternative directions for the future.

CHAPTER THREE

CONTENT

We get used to particular papers and programmes and often, after a while, come to take their typical content for granted. Some degree of familiarity with a particular paper or programme is indeed often necessary, if what it has to offer is to come through to us easily. But of course there is a danger, as we get used to the particular way of looking at the world which our favourite paper or programme embodies, that we shall forget that it is, after all, only one of many possible ways. Most of us realize that the worlds seen by *The Times* and by the *Daily Mirror*, or by the Third Programme and by an I.T.V. programme company, are in certain basic ways different. But to know only these general and obvious differences is not enough. If we are to be really alert and independent, as in a democracy we ought to be, we have to look critically at the content and methods we are used to as well as those which we have decided are not our kind. There are several ways in which we can make this examination for ourselves. I want to illustrate some of them, both to show possible methods and to give some actual material. This kind of examination needs to be carried out regularly, not only so that we can keep in touch with important changes (which are often not announced), but also so that we can make historical comparisons and discern particular trends. Also, there is always some error in sampling, and this can only be reduced if other samples are taken and if many people are carrying out the examination. Where similar work has been done previously, I have kept as far as possible to procedures which allow comparisons. But such work has been scattered and irregular, and I have tried to introduce some new kinds. I will set this work out in three