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The Mass Media and Language Development

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The mass media have penetrated so deeply in our Society that it is important to examine the types and nature of the influence the mass media exert on individuals in society.

"Today in our cities, most learning occurs outside the classroom. The sheer quantity of information conveyed by press-magazines-film-TV-radio far exceeds the quantity of information conveyed by school instruction and texts. This challenge has destroyed the monopoly of the books as a teaching aid and cracked the very walls of the classroom so suddenly that we're confused, baffled, (Sontag, 1968, p137)." The influence can be divided into three basic types: linguistic, psychological and social. This essay will involve discussion of the linguistic type in relation to education.

One can identify many forms of mass media such as: the English language, books, magazines, newspapers, comics, advertising, records, film, radio and television. Many of these forms are inter-related. For example, advertising permeates many forms of mass media. For the purposes of this essay television is seen as being of prime importance, firstly because of its widespread availability and influence and secondly, to give the topic under discussion a focal point.

Before examining the influence of the mass media on language development one must first decide whether the language of the mass media contributes a "new" language in comparison to traditional forms of communication, such as the book. One school of thought, of which Marshall McLuhan is an exponent, claims that the "new" mass media (film, radio and television) are new languages, the grammar of which is yet unknown. "Radio, film, TV, pushed written expression toward the spontaneous shifts and freedom of the spoken idiom. They aided us in the recovery of intense awareness of facial language and bodily gesture, (Sontag 1968, 139). Hence, it is claimed, a rich colourful language developed conveying moods and emotions, happenings and characters, even thoughts, none of which could be properly packaged in words. Conversely, the message communicated through print" ... means that it must first be broken down into parts and then mediated eyedropper fashion, one thing at a time, in an abstract, linear, fragmented, sequential way" (Rosenthal, 1969, p250).

However, with the mass media we are still using exactly the same means of communication. A newspaper still uses words; a television screen still uses pictures and the spoken word for titles and subtitles. The mass media solicit

our attention incessantly with messages addressed to the eye and ear, or both, using the printed or spoken word, still and moving pictures and various combinations of these. The vehicles of these messages, illustrated newspapers, television and cinema, involves the marriage of two languages with wholly different characteristics. However, the audience without the verbal skills and conceptual apparatus that the commentary calls for will see far more than they understand. Words are basic to the communication process whatever the medium.

An important aspect, in considering the mass media and language development, is the nature of various types of mass media. Marshall McLuhan claims that the "contents" of the mass media cannot be seen apart from the technology of the media themselves. How they say something and to whom they say it, affects what they have to say. For example, a statement made on television may be very different, in both its character and its effects, from a statement, materially the same, made through the press. Accordingly, we need to know something of a medium's technical operation before we can examine its impact. The medium and the message are basically inseparable, states McLuhan.

In this context Marshall McLuhan's ideas on "hot" and "cold" media are of particular significance. There is a basic principle that distinguishes a "hot" medium like radio from a "cool" medium like TV. A "hot" medium is one that extends one single sense in "high definition". High definition is the state of being well filled with data. Hot media do not leave so much to be filled in by the audience. Hot media are, therefore, low in participation or completion by the audience. Radio affects most people intimately, person to person, offering a world of unspoken communication between writer-speaker and the listener. That is the immediate aspect of radio. A private experience. There are two important factors to consider in order to put McLuhan's ideas into perspective. Firstly, there is no genuine feedback in the mechanized mass media. Secondly, as Bernard Benelson postulates in *The Variable Influence of Communication*, the greater amount of "personalism" the communication act contains, the more effective it presumably is.

Research findings in relation to the mass media and language development are by no means definitive. Apart from supplying data on viewing habits, they tend to consist of theories yet to be tested or suggest areas wanting in investigation. What follows, therefore, is an outline of the possible implications of the mass media regarding language development, with particular reference to the influence of television.

The first piece of research to be examined was conducted in England in 1968 by H. T. Himmelweit, A. N. Oppenheim & P. Vince. They discovered that once children started viewing television they certainly read less than before, but the degree to which this occurred depended on the type of child and on how long he had been viewing. At first television also decreased the proportion of books to comics read, but as children got used to viewing they

gradually reverted to books. The duller children then increased their share. The researchers also found that children with access to television listen very little to radio. The gains made by "duller" children were seen as being greater than bright children, especially those who moved in a culturally rich environment where the loss may be greater than the gain. This conflicts with findings of American researchers investigating the influence of "Sesame Street".

An outline of recent research on the American scene in regard to the mass media and language development, is found in *The Plug-In Drug* by Marie Winn (1977). "Sesame Street", which was designed to bridge the gap between middle class children who had ample verbal opportunities at home and those deprived of such opportunities, was evaluated by the Educational Testing Service in 1970 and 1971. This study indicated that gains were being made as a result of viewing experiences. In 1975 the Russel Sage Foundation re-evaluated the success of "Sesame Street". It found that children used in the first evaluation were encouraged to watch the programme in a particular way and received extra attention in the form of personal visits and promotional materials and the parents of the children were also involved. Therefore adult intervention was an important variable. The second evaluation concluded that the gap may have actually widened as a result of widespread viewing of "Sesame Street". The gap in this sense referring to the differentiation of linguistic competence of lower compared to middle class children.

The question then arises, how much of what children see on television do they understand? Research along these lines was conducted by Allen in 1969. An experiment was carried out in which a programme was shown to a group of children where a man was building a block tower. This involved twenty separate acts. The children were only able to reproduce six of the twenty actions. A second group of children viewed the same programme with an experimenter, who verbally described each act. In this group there was a 50% increase in ability to re-enact the filmed activities. Further research was carried out in this area in the 1970's. In one case a group of children of ages four, seven and ten were shown a twenty minute fairy tale. Only 20% of the four year olds understood the story line, whereas the older children's comprehension was far superior.

The question these experiments bring to mind is; what sort of mental activity are children engaging in while watching television and what effect does this have on mental development, and in particular on language development? Marie Winn (1977) has put forward an interesting thesis involving the area of neurolinguistics. The left hemisphere of the brain operates most of the brain's verbal and logical activities. The specific functions of the right hemisphere are less clearly understood, but it is known to be involved with spatial, visual and perhaps affective activities. Experimental evidence shows that the processes involved in remembering what we see are quite different from those by which we remember what we read or hear as words. For example, a person meeting someone he has not seen for quite some time might say. "I remember the face, but the name escapes me."

It must be remembered however, that hemisphere specialization characterizes the adult brain alone. At the time the child begins to acquire language, each hemisphere seems to be equally developed in verbal capacity. The final state of "brain maturity" occurs at around twelve years of age.

Clearly a non-verbal form of mental functioning precedes the verbal in the child's early development. Researchers have demonstrated that infants as young as three months of age can differentiate between pictures of a regular human face and one with three eyes. With the development of language nonverbal thinking ceases to serve its original function as the major source of learning, but it does not disappear.

An important question, in the light of the information provided above, is whether television is essentially a non-verbal, visual experience in the lives of young children. "The trance-like state that characterizes many children's viewing behaviour suggests that normal, active cognition is temporarily replaced by a state of mind more akin to meditation or other right-hemisphere-mediated states. The use of television, moreover, as a pacifying agent, a relaxant for overstimulated children and a sedative for troublesome children, points up the nonverbal nature of the television experience," (Winn, 1977, p42). There is a critical difference between a language experience that requires no reciprocal participation and one in which the child must involve himself actively, as in an exchange with another person. If the child's television viewing indeed involves a different sort of mental activity then this activity may prove to stimulate different parts of his/her developing brain. The question that this line of thought provokes is - might not the television child emerge from childhood with certain left - hemisphere skills - those verbal and logical ones - less developed than the visual and spatial capabilities governed by the right-hemisphere?

The suggestion is not that the television child will fail to acquire language. What is of concern is the child's commitment to language as a means of expression and in particular to the verbal mode. The success with which a child, who has only recently made the transition from nonverbal to verbal thought, acquires language depends upon his opportunities to exercise his growing verbal skills. The greater the child's verbal opportunities, the greater the likelihood that his language will grow in complexity and his rational verbal thinking abilities will sharpen. The fewer his opportunities, the greater the likelihood that certain linguistic areas will remain undeveloped or underdeveloped. The hypothesis is that television tends to limit the child's verbal opportunities because it is essentially a nonverbal experience for the child.

A comparison between television viewing and reading may provide some useful insights into the impact of television on language development. In reading we learn to transform abstract figures (O,K) into sounds that make up the words of our language. These words are invested with meanings previously learned in the spoken language. This process also involves the creation of

"reading images". For example, when we read the word "dog" an image representing a dog is conjured up as well. These images are based upon our own life experiences and therefore different people will have different "reading images" for the same word.

Television images do not go through a complex symbolic transformation. The mind does not have to decode and manipulate during the television experience in comparison to the "creative image - making" process of reading. Could this mean children may find it difficult to adjust to nonvisual activities? For example, listening to a story.

The pace of the television experience compared to reading is an important aspect which must be considered. Reading is more personalized in this respect, in that the pace of reading clearly depends upon the reader. Television, on the other hand, consists mainly of a series of flashing images, which are usually not repeated. The pace of the television experience, is beyond the control of the viewer. He cannot "turn back" if a word or phrase is not understood.

Another important difference between reading and television viewing is the relative acquaintance of readers and viewers with the fundamental elements of each medium. As a child begins to learn reading he begins to acquire the rudiments of writing. His understanding of what he reads, and his feelings about it, are necessarily affected, and deepened, by his possession of writing as a means of communicating. A young child watching television enters a realm of materials beyond his control and understanding. Thus he takes on a far more powerless and ignorant role in front of the television set than in front of a book. Reading involves a complex form of mental activity, trains the mind in concentration skills and develops the powers of imagination and inner visualization. The flexibility of its pace lends itself to a better and deeper comprehension of the material communicated.

"A large majority of those who have passed through the primary and secondary school system can "read" but not READ" (Winn, 1977, p59). The so-called "lazy reader" has not made the transition from the acquisition of the reading skill to an ability to absorb what he reads. The "lazy reader" reads fluently, but not with the degree of involvement and concentration required for full comprehension. If it is accepted that the television child's opportunities to learn to focus attention sharply and sustain concentration are limited then it could be that the mental diffuseness demanded by the television experience may cause children, who have been exposed to thousands of hours in front of the set, to approach the reading word more superficially, more impatiently, more vaguely. "TV stimulates casting your eye over the page, and that is a far different thing from reading." (Winn, 1977, p60).

An interesting area which Marie Winn explores, is the influence of television on reading styles, in particular the proliferation of what she calls the "non-book" is one in which there is no sustained story of a carefully developed

argument that is read from beginning to end. It has a high percentage of visual material and provides a diversion for the child who does not feel comfortable with the old sequential style of reading. The "Guinness Book of Records" falls into this category. The proposition is that with the advent of nonbooks and television we are shifting from a culture of readers to one of watchers. The notable decline in the popularity of fiction among children in the last two decades seems related to the fantasy material available to them on television.

As was stated at the outset research in the area of the mass media and language development is neither definitive nor exhaustive. The point remains clear, however, that the mass media, and in particular television, are an important aspect of our culture. A child is exposed to approximately 4,000 hours of television before he/she starts school and he/she will have clocked up about 15,000 hours by the time he/she has left school, compared to the approximate figure of 10,000 hours spent at that institution (Rosenthal, 1969, p252). As can be seen in this paper the trend has been to judge the "new" media (radio, film and television) in terms of the "old" media (books). However, very little appears to have been done to provide children with the basic tools of perception to enable them to come to terms with the "new" media in a meaningful way. It has been said that children who have grown up with the mass media, are better able to cope with the special languages the media employ. This may not be so. That children react to the media doesn't necessarily mean that they have the ability to analyze and understand.

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(Newnham).

K16 "Marshall McLuhan Monday Conference 26/6/' 77 (50 Mins.)

K290 Media "Say It With Film". (10 Mins).

K298 Media "The Dream Time" (20 Mins.) A.B.C. T.V. 19/8/' 76

K344 Communications "The Wired World".

K358 "This is Marshall McLuhan, The Medium is the Message" (60 Mins)

K383 "TV and Your Child" Four Corners 12/2/' 1977.