Specialists on Intelligence

Harold D. Lasswell

Public opinion in the public interest depends upon the general level of intelligence in society, and upon the degree of successful specialization upon intelligence. No matter how high the general level, the community cannot act intelligently unless needed data are supplied by specialists. The democratic citizen may be well equipped to think about what he reads, sees, and hears; or to observe himself and discount the effect of his own biases. But the result of his thinking may be absurd unless he has the proper raw materials of thought; and these come chiefly from specialists upon intelligence. There are specialists on truth to make original observations; there are specialists on clarity to make them lucid; there are specialists on interest to make them vivid. Unless these specialists are properly trained and articulated with one another and the public, we cannot reasonably hope for public opinion in the public interest.

In a democracy the chief function of the specialist on intelligence is to contribute to the discovery of justice. Democracy is bound by its own principles to take the thoughts and feelings of others into account; hence a democratic society must be equipped with specialists who communicate the truth about others with clarity and emphasis. For sympathetic observation of others, modern society has social and psychological scientists; for clarification and emphasis, there are specialists in every channel of communication.

Our civilization has witnessed an unparalleled growth of the total stream of communication, and of specialists upon communication. Some of this work of communication presents us with charts that show how the nonsymbolic parts of the world have grown in recent times. However, a comparable job has not been done in presenting curves that show the volume of our symbolic world—curves that depict the soaring total of new words introduced into the dictionaries and lexicons of the last hundred years, or the increase in the number of words that are shot every day through the presses or over the wires or over the long and short waves of the world. Yet the fact is that the expansion of the material environment is more than outstripped by the symbolic

Reprinted from Democracy through Public Opinion (New York: Banta, 1941), chap. 5.
world. The volume and variety of the stream of communication surpasses even the gadgets of modern science and technology.

Little wonder in the light of this general growth that the specialists on communication have multiplied in number and variety. They range all the way from austere specialists on experimental psychology to boisterous wise-crackers on the stage. All who specialize in symbols (words or their substitutes) contribute to the flow of communication. There are sociologists who devote a lifetime to the study of one American community. There are anthropologists who live for years among people of alien culture on the fringe of civilization. Such specialists rarely contribute to press, radio and motion picture; yet from their occasional reports may come new themes and anecdotes, or even new attitudes toward life. Some specialists perfect new instruments of measurement to describe the skills and attitudes of others.

At first glance, the highly specialized social scientist, psychologist, or physician seems to have little in common with the staff of the media of mass communication. There are bustling reporters and exacting copyreaders, pontifical editors and temperamental feature writers, serious-minded news commentators and harum-scarum "gag-men." There are scores of distinctive skill groups in the field of publication, radio and motion picture; and few of them operate with the care or leisure of the social scientist. The production cycle of the news commentator may be the split second; an idea comes into his mind, and rolls off his tongue into the ears of the listening audience. The scientific specialist on tests may spend months or years in the perfecting of a scale of measurement; although he knows in a general way that he must eventually "produce," his methods and results may be withheld for years.

It would be easy, however, to exaggerate the difference between the life of the scientist and of other specialists on the flow of intelligence. The production cycle of the novelist, dramatist or poet may equal or exceed the scientist; and it is not to be assumed that the scientist is under no pressure to publish his results.

Even when proper allowance is made for the similarities between scientist and nonscientist, wide differences of emphasis remain, differences that greatly complicate the task of unifying the intellectual skills of society in the discovery of justice. The scientist is, above all, a specialist on the systematic expression of new truth. Whatever his working methods, he hopes to systematize his observations according to an elaborate set of postulates, definitions, and propositions. The disciplined scientist looks forward to the day when he can find a mathematical formula that unifies the observations that are made.

As you pass from the intellectual who is specialized on the discovery of truth, you come to those who clarify. Their task is to make new truth lucid to the beginning student, or the inquisitive layman. In some respects they touch shoulders with specialists on interest; for most of them seek to enliven what they do in the hope of reaching an ever-broadening public. In some ways the
writer of textbooks carries the heaviest burden of all; he is caught between the ever-expanding territory of the specialist on truth, and the ever-inviting audience of all who might be interested in truth, once it is simplified and vivified.

There are specialists on interest who are cheerfully unconcerned about truth or clarity; they seek only plausibility and applause. They are impatient of restriction in the interest of truth, morals or taste; yet they often hit upon devices of communication that widen the potential audience of truth.

Every distinctive skill has something to contribute to the task of improving the stream of communication. We need specialists on truth, clarity, and interest; we need to harness them to the discovery of justice. In a just society, the channels of communication must focus attention upon the clear presentation of truth about the thoughts and feelings of others.

It cannot be successfully maintained that in the recent history of American society our specialists on intelligence have performed a satisfactory job. We need go no further back than the catastrophic depression after 1929. Specialists did not quickly enough sense the human significance of what was happening to Americans who lost employment. Everyone was able to see the threat of starvation and to be properly horrified by it. All were impressed by the crippling effects of material loss upon the health and comfort of the jobless. And presently the jobless were provided with bread; and this was humane and sound. But the specialists did not make it clear to themselves—not to others—that a more subtle blow was inflicted upon the jobless. They might be given bread; but they were provided with no reason for living. Millions of jobless were allowed to continue in a state of suspended animation, stigmatized as useless members of society.

If our society had been thoroughly respectful of human personality, our specialists would have been quick to sense the violation of human dignity that was perpetuated in our treatment of the jobless. They would have sensed the true proportions of the tragedy in the declaration of uselessness that was implied in the word, “the unemployed.”

Why this comparative insensitivity to the democratic values? No doubt this obtuseness is connected with the exaggerated amount of attention that has been given to economic activity and economic phraseology. The business man is accustomed to think in terms of profit and loss, to translate every alternative in terms of the dollar. He is a specialist on profits. He is not accustomed to translate what he does in terms of increased or diminished self-respect of workers, customers, investors, or any other group of society; or even of himself. The business man is accustomed to take these outcomes for granted. And the tax gatherers, even in a democratic government, think in dollars.

Neither business nor government makes up a balance sheet of what it contributes to the self-respect of human beings.

We must rely upon the specialists on intelligence to provide us with a
picture of human reality that is true, clear, and vivid. The primary responsibility for truth rests with two groups of specialists; researchers and reporters. Researchers study events until they can describe them in a way that contributes new data to the fundamental propositions of the human sciences. For the most part, we depend upon social scientists, psychologists, and physicians for the basic data that we need. But we cannot wait until events are described by the eye of science; we need to know what happened yesterday, today, or even a few moments ago. The cursory look is the special skill of the competent reporter. His job is to see as much of the truth as he can at a glance, for he must act against a "deadline."

Although it is customary in some circles to contrast the researcher with the reporter to the disparagement of the latter, this judgment is quite unjustified. Researchers and reporters are engaged upon a common task, and as our society learns more about itself, there will be closer contact between them. Researchers will contribute more to the fundamental education of the reporters, and in this way improve the skill with which they appraise the meaning of what they see. This process has already begun; the newer generation of reporters is often trained in the social and psychological sciences. Schools of journalism are changing their scope, sloughing off their superabundant "tool courses," and adding the human sciences.

It need not be supposed that the relation between researcher and reporter is entirely one-sided. Modern reporters have already begun to contribute in greater volume than before to the description and the interpretation of recent events.

One result of closer contact between reporter and researcher is that the results of research are clarified and vivified for a wider public. A rising generation of specialists has come into existence for the reporting of scientific research.

Any well-balanced picture of human reality must be selective, and this calls for a clear conception of the whole. What is the structure of American society as a whole, and in different regions? Fortunately recent research has provided us with far better knowledge of the basic facts about America than we have ever had before. Among metropolitan areas, basic data are perhaps best for Chicago, thanks to the work of the Social Science Committee of the University of Chicago.1 One of the best known regional areas is the twin cities, thanks to studies at the University of Minnesota. The National Resources Board has provided basic data for several component areas of the entire nation.

Research has already given us valuable cross-sectional descriptions of

1. Organized at the instigation of Charles E. Merriam, who was also the prime mover of the national Social Science Research Council.
life at recurring intervals in some American communities. The most famous example is *Middletown*, which was described by the Lynds on the eve of the Great Depression, and again several years later. There is much current interest in the systematic study of local communities, and the human realities of American life are becoming better known. We have fuller pictures of what it means to belong to a particular income group in a specific area of the country; we are learning, too, of the position of the low deference groups (Negroes, Mexicans, Japanese, for example). Our studies include the casual laborer, the youth, the women, and many other components of the nation.

Because the makers and executors of policy are so rushed, the record-taking function must go into the hands of a specialist on that particular skill. Researchers and reporters must be motivated and then outfitted with proper equipment before they can wisely be entrusted with the record-making function.

The specialized observer of interpersonal relations is always attracted into two opposite directions: to spend a very short time observing a great many people; to spend a very long time observing a few.

The well-equipped observer of human relations makes a record of more than the literal words that people use. He pays attention to what people know they are saying, and also to what they do not know they are saying.

Researchers and reporters are alike in that they have the same basic contribution to make to the achievement of democracy. They are the specialists upon whom we must depend for the facts which are needed before it is possible to achieve public opinion in the public interest. From these specialists we need above all to obtain a clear, truthful, and vivid picture of the degree of mutual respect that obtains throughout society. We depend upon these observers to supply us with the facts about the degree of present justice.

The moralists have been at a disadvantage in comparison with "materialists" because the moralists have no method of observation. For the most part the professional devotees of the good have been less well equipped than their rivals. The moralists have been specialists in reading what other moralists have said in the past, and in the logical analysis of this literary inheritance. They have often delivered secular sermons on morality. But they were incapable of discovering which events in society were just and which were not. They had no technique of describing such "intangible" relationships as "mutual respect." The "materialist" could point to his charts of goods and prices; he could dismiss the sermonizing of the moralist who talked about the primacy of "human" values. When the moralist was asked to say which events were "just" or "unjust," he often discredited himself by giving voice to the simple preferences of his social class or income group. It was too often obvious that majestic rhetoric in celebration of justice was an imposing cloak for petty prejudice.
Our problem is to give eyes, ears, hands and feet to morality. We cannot specialize indefinitely upon the cry for justice divorced from the means appropriate to the end of increasing the frequency of just events. Men and women who grow up in our civilization share many democratic aspirations; and our problem is to discover how democratic attitudes can be guided by proper insight into the conditions and requirements of justice. This is the primary function of the researcher and the reporter, for they specialize upon the observing of events; and what we need to know the truth about is the state of mutual respect throughout society. The channels of communication in a democratic society must be flooded with communications that show us the truth about deference. Public knowledge of the state of justice is itself a means to a just society.