

A TECHNIQUE FOR STUDYING A SOCIAL PROBLEM

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In the summer of 1928, Mr. W. H. Short, director of the National Committee for Study of Social Values in Motion Pictures, now known as the Motion Picture Research Council, proposed to the writer the possibility of securing accurate data concerning the influence of moving pictures upon children. He stated that his organization had been formed by a number of important public persons who were disturbed by the practices and policies of the motion-picture industry and were apprehensive about the harmfulness of the influence exerted by the movies upon the American public and particularly upon the children and youth of the nation. But, he explained, the Council found, when it began to collect evidence to substantiate these impressions and lay plans for the improvement of the motion-picture situation, that the quality and quantity of the data available were not as high as the Council would like to have them. It was not difficult to collect the types of evidence which are ordinarily used in settling social issues—the opinions of thoughtful people, individual experiences, arrays of statistics, and resolutions of important organizations. But most of these data were based upon personal judgment and individual opinion and were, therefore, open to controversy. So the Council had decided, he stated, to ask competent investigators to use the best scientific techniques and, if possible, discover valid answers to certain questions which were of concern to the Council. He, therefore, presented the proposal to assemble persons skilled in using the techniques of sociology, psychology, and education to study these complicated matters, and thereby seek to substitute facts for impressions and convictions.

In the autumn of 1928, a group of university men and

women were assembled in Columbus to see what could be done, and with them met the leaders of the Council and officers of the Payne Fund, which was prepared to support a program of investigation if one should be developed. At this meeting the members of the Council elaborated in considerable detail the issues with which they were concerned and the questions upon which scientific data were lacking. The university group deliberated upon this information to discover the types of investigation which might be carried on, and prepared a tentative series of studies which gave promise of developing scientific information about the issues presented by the Council. The Payne Fund agreed to support the study and the investigators were organized into a Committee on Educational Research of the Payne Fund. Promptly the studies got under way. Each of the investigators worked independently upon his problem. Once a year they met and reviewed what they had done, eliminated studies which gave no promise of yielding results and added studies which looked promising. In 1932 the studies are practically completed and ready for publication, which is now in process.

The administration of the investigation was based upon a central policy—to ignore detailed questions temporarily and select pivotal questions for study which, when answered and arranged in a series, would provide in skeleton form a measure of the influence of moving pictures upon children. Details might then be filled in later without altering the general form of the picture.

In acting upon this policy the committee developed a plan involving four procedures.

The first problem was to assemble a group of individuals (as already described) who were competent to examine a complexity of issues and decide upon the feasibility of setting up a program of investigation. The issues being sociological and psychological, it was logical to assemble a group of sociologists, psychologists, and educa-

tors whose experience in studying the problems which seemed to be involved in this situation was adequate to the task in hand and whose scientific reputation and judgment were good. This group consisted of Messrs. Thurstone, Freeman, May, Renshaw, Stoddard, and Mrs. Charters in psychology, Messrs. Blumer and Park in sociology, Dr. and Mrs. Scham in hygiene and health, and Mr. Dale in education. At later dates Mr. Ruckmick in psychology and Messrs. Thrasher and Peters in sociology were added to investigate problems that were essential to complete the series. To this group were added certain assistants to some of the foregoing members who worked more or less under their direction: Messrs. Cressey, Dysinger, Holaday, Hauser, and Shuttleworth. Other assistants attended the committee meetings upon occasion.

In its annual meetings, the members of the committee formulated plans, reported progress, and criticized and assisted each other. Its functions were those of a conference upon technical matters. It made no recommendations. The conclusions drawn by each investigator from his studies are presented upon his individual responsibility.

The second administrative problem of the committee was to examine the problems presented to it in order to find out what they were. This procedure was simple. At the initial meeting of the committee a number of the active members of the Motion Picture Research Council presented the issues in conferences extending over several meetings during three days. These members of the Council who had intimate and first-hand knowledge of the production and distribution of pictures and of the policies and practices of the industry discussed the moving-picture situation in detail with ample elaboration. As the committee listened to the discussion the investigators quickly observed the controversial nature of the issues, the strong feelings aroused by these issues, and the vigorous positions taken by the Council members. At the same time they located

points at which they might provide data less controversial, less subject to opinion, and more valid than the data available to the members of the Council upon those points! The discussions were useful in helping the investigators to locate possible problems for investigation and to orient themselves in the field. They proved to be effective in that the program of study developed by the committee during the initial meetings did not need to be radically changed during the four years that the committee worked upon it.

The third administrative problem was the setting up of the program of investigation. It proceeded along these lines: First, the possible effects of moving pictures as a medium of visual instruction were isolated. It was agreed that moving pictures might affect the knowledge, attitudes, emotions, and conduct of children. These were studies in which the actual content of commercial pictures would be a minor matter, and the effect produced through visual media would be the major consideration. Second, the content of commercial pictures would be examined to see the direction in which information, attitudes, emotions, and conduct would tend to be developed by current pictures. The first group of studies is general in nature; the second deals specifically with the effect of pictures currently shown in the theaters. If the pictures are "good" and if they have any influence the effects will obviously flow in one direction; if "bad" in another. In pursuance of this policy the following studies were assigned:

The amount of information gained by one exposure to a film was studied by Messrs. Stoddard and Holaday at the University of Iowa. Adequate techniques were set up to ascertain how many facts children learned and how long the facts persisted in memory at different ages, beginning with children in the second grade. The significance of the amount required was expressed as the percentage which was acquired by children of different ages of facts learned by superior adults. That is, children in the second grade could answer, let us say, 75 per cent as many factual

questions as superior adults and could remember them 75 per cent as well. This study would, therefore, reveal the extent to which an adult who accompanies an eight-year-old child to a movie may expect the child to see what he sees, and enable him to predict the amount the child would forget in a stipulated time.

The effect of moving pictures upon the emotional experience of children was measured with the use of the electric galvanometer and other instruments by Messrs. Ruckmick and Dysinger of the University of Iowa. In this case it was possible to measure the deflection of a needle as the subjects watched the unfolding scenes in the pictures.

The extent to which moving pictures might be expected to influence the attitudes of children towards various values was studied by Messrs. May and Shuttleworth of Yale University and Mr. Thurstone and Miss Peterson of the University of Chicago. The Yale study used certain techniques developed in the investigations of the Institute of Social and Religious Research for other purposes. These techniques, however, were not entirely satisfactory because it was not possible to find children who had not attended the movies to compare with those who had, and the test of attitude consisted of the answer to a single question.

For the Chicago study the investigators constructed a number of scales following the well-known Thurstone techniques. With the use of these scales it was possible to measure the effect of a single picture upon the attitude of high-school children towards the Negro, the Chinese, crime, and the like. The investigators were able to measure the amount of change in attitude from one exposure. They were also able to depict the persistence of change in attitude after extended periods had elapsed. In a few cases they were able to measure the cumulative effect of exposure to several pictures of the same type.

Having thus cared for the effect of pictures upon the information, emotions, and attitudes, attention was given

to the effect of theater attendance upon the health of children. Originally it was proposed to study the health of children directly, but for various reasons the committee decided to study the effect of motion pictures upon motility in sleep and relate this to the effect upon health through the relationship of sleep disturbance to health. This study was carried on by Messrs. Renshaw and Miller of Ohio State University.

Since conduct is influenced through the acquisition of information, the modification of attitudes, the stirring of the emotions, and the physical condition of people, it may be deduced that conduct can be predicted if these factors are known. However, the committee decided to institute investigations to discover evidences of one-to-one correspondence between the movies and the conduct of children to determine in effect whether the conduct patterns of individual children could be traced to motion pictures which they had seen.

This study was conducted by Messrs. Blumer and Hauser of the University of Chicago. It consisted of two subordinate studies: the effect upon conduct in general and the effect upon delinquency and crime as a special study. The techniques used were based mainly upon autobiographies written by high-school children, college students, delinquents and criminals, and interviews with those who wrote the autobiographies. At New York University Messrs. Thrasher and Cressey, in connection with the Boys' Club Study, investigated by a variety of techniques the same problem of one-to-one correspondence between patterns of conduct seen in the movies and those practised by children.

This group of studies thus presents in objective terms what may be expected to be the influence of the visual presentation of materials upon the experience of children.

The second group of studies dealt with certain educational aspects of commercial pictures currently shown in motion-picture theaters. The first question to be consid-

ered was this: "What do people see when they attend the movies?" The answer to this question was secured by Mr. Dale of Ohio State University through an analysis of the content of moving pictures by scenes. These scenes were classified with such captions as crime, cabaret, murder, courage, ambition, and the like. The content of scores of pictures shown during 1931 was examined, and the investigation shows how many of each type of scene are contained in the large sample of pictures analyzed.

The next question logically raised in following the argument through is this: "Are the pictures which people see 'good' or 'bad'?" What constitutes "goodness" or "badness" in a picture was studied by Professor C. C. Peters of Pennsylvania State College. In effect he assumed that the "goodness" or "badness" of a scene was determined by the opinion of the people who judged it. A picture in itself is not "good" or "bad"; it appears good to an individual or a group when it harmonizes or conflicts with the mores of the individual or the group. Consequently, he constructed scales of actions ranging from those which were in serious conflict with the mores of a group to those which were congruent with the mores. This he did for four types of conduct, one of which was aggressive lovemaking by women, and another of which was parental attitude towards children. With this scale at hand he was able to determine the judgment of what was considered to be good or bad by various groups of people such as college professors, young male factory workers, ministers, young society women in New York, and the like.

These standards having been determined, it was possible to view selected scenes in the movies and decide where any one of these groups would place the scene in the scale, or, in other words, to discover whether or not the action in the scene was above or below the level of the standards of a specified group.

Having thus presented the content of current moving pictures and in certain respects having determined

the moral content, the committee was prepared to consider the question "Do many children see these pictures?" The answer to this question was studied by Mr. Dale, who discovered from data collected over a wide geographical area that children of all ages attend the movies on the average of once a week. This having been established, it is possible even to say that children do see the current pictures and are exposed to the scenes as analyzed.

The practical outcome of the study is this: We can be assured that each picture which a child sees has a measurable influence upon him. He learns new facts, his emotions are stirred, his attitudes are changed, his conduct patterns are modified, and his sleep is affected—all in a measurable degree. If the pictures are "good" he will be influenced in that direction; if they are "bad" he will be moved in a corresponding manner. The picture of today helps to mold the citizen of tomorrow.

One means of control over the influence of moving pictures upon children lies in the education of the children themselves in appreciation and criticism of pictures. If children can learn to discriminate and judge the value of pictures they will be less ignorantly influenced. Moving-picture appreciation is, then, one means of control. This problem was studied by Mr. Dale, who has produced a textbook on the subject for use by high-school students to teach them how to understand, evaluate, and criticize the pictures which they see.

In conclusion, the committee members have blocked out an answer to the perplexing question of the influence of motion pictures upon children. They have lifted the argument from the level of controversy and opinion to the level of objective fact, and have provided as a by-product a sample of an interesting technique for resolving a complicated social problem into a logical series of studies, which, when independently investigated, may be meshed into a clear-cut answer to the original question.¹

¹The following articles appear in the logical sequence suggested above. They present in greater detail the techniques of research as evolved in the various phases of the motion-picture studies.

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