

A FEW SPECULATIONS ON THE FUTURE OF

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IN ATTEMPTING TO FORECAST a bit of the future of general semantics, perhaps we should first try to imagine some of the environmental changes to be faced in the coming years of the 1980s. If we are spared a war or widespread civil disruptions connected with a major economic depression, then changes in the mass media and how people respond to the media may be among the most influential changes that we will see.

We can expect more and more pictorial messages in our environment from broadcast TV, cable TV, video tapes, video disks, and other sources.

We can look forward to an increasing reliance on TV and related pictorial material for news information, entertainment, instruction, and other subjects for thought and bench marks for behavior.

Increasing reliance on TV will mean an increasing use of vicarious experiences, rather than first-hand experiences, for evaluating and judging motivations and actions.

We will see and incorporate into our thinking more and more programs that mix fictional and factually reported events into stories and "documentaries," the accuracy and historical value of which will remain unknown.

Changes in the home and social environment will result in intensifying the force of TV as a shaper of values and conduct. In the coming years more and more adults may choose to live alone. For

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example, in the U.S., more than 20% of the housing sold last year was sold to single buyers. As more people live alone, broadcast and cable TV will furnish more and more of the "raw material" — more accurately, the "half-baked material" — for perceptions and evaluations.

A severe enough recession or depression might reverse this trend toward more single-person households, forcing people to share individual dwellings. But depressed economic conditions can also curtail costly social activities and result in increasing still more one of the most economical of pastimes to be found in developed countries: TV viewing.

Changes in education will probably include an increasing use of audio-visual materials in teaching — more films, TV broadcasts, video tapes, and video disks. With few exceptions, decreasing emphasis will be placed on printed instructional materials in most primary and secondary classrooms. As radically cheaper and more convenient pictorial materials become widely circulated, we will see a dramatic decrease in those textbooks consisting mostly of words and having few illustrations.

Students will be offered significantly fewer opportunities for making first-hand observations. Instead, they will be increasingly encouraged to view and accept the pictorially presented observations of others as bases for reports, inferences, and judgments. For example, in zoology and botany classrooms, students may examine considerably fewer specimens and more pictorial representations of specimens.

We can summarize in general semantics terminology some of these changes in the mass media and in the home and school environments.

TV and related media will furnish more and more of the maps individuals use to make sense of their world and create expectations regarding their relationships with other people.

The distinction between maps and territories — between verbal-pictorial accounts and nonverbal events and situations — will be deemphasized and blurred. TV news broadcasting will probably bring us an increasing number of pictures of "staged" or "recreated" news events.

The distinction between "fact" and "fiction," between maps of historical events and maps of imaginary events and situations, will become less evident in stories and so-called "documentaries" appearing on TV programs.

In schools there will be fewer opportunities for students to learn to associate symbols with their nonverbal referents.

Students will make fewer observations and have greater difficulty in learning some of the basics of critical thinking: how to report

observations, how to make inferences and draw conclusions, how to arrive at judgments.

In short, more people will remain unconscious of their own abstracting processes as a result of these changes in the mass media; more people will learn to confuse levels of abstraction, although they will be unaware of such misvaluations; more people will fail to recognize the content of TV as abstractions of the TV producer, the director, and his or her crew.

Let us suppose that the future does promise these changes. Then what kind of education and training in general semantics will best help us cope with them? What kinds of courses and study materials will help prepare students, adults — all of us — to live in an environment dominated by the visual messages of TV?

First, we need more courses dealing with descriptions of the problem; courses for studying and spelling out the nature of the environmental changes, as pictorial information increases and printed information decreases in amount and importance.

More courses are needed to explore the implications — for both thinking and behavior — of substituting visual maps for verbal maps. I understand some of these questions are already being considered in courses in Media Ecology at New York University, in the Annenberg School of Communication at the University of Pennsylvania, and elsewhere.

Korzybski's structural differential is used to train students in recognizing many characteristics of the abstracting process — levels, hierarchies, the natural order, various functions of statements, and so on. But the knowledgeable use of the structural differential usually requires long, rigorous study and practice under highly trained leadership.

Sequenced study materials, proceeding from simple to complex, might introduce uses and benefits of the structural differential to a much greater number of people than now use it.

The structural differential, when studied and practiced with graded exercises ranging from "easy" to "difficult," would surely find more applications in high school and college courses.

General semantics has few if any devices for ordering pictorial abstractions. If we are to assess how the pictures of TV are evaluated, we need differentials, measuring instruments, tests, exercises, or some kind of devices for distinguishing various orders or visual abstractions. Until we have such instruments we will have little power to deal with how the human nervous system evaluates sequences, organizations, divisions, types, and functions of the pictorial components of perceptual abstracting.

If uses of any such "perceptual differentials" could fit within the

explanatory frameworks of the structural differential, then the applicability, generality, and overall value of both types of differentials might be mutually enhanced.

In the coming years of the 1980s, teachers in schools and colleges will probably face increasing pressure to demonstrate what students are learning and how much is being learned. Subject matter that is measurable by standardized tests — and consequently that is easily evaluated by teachers and school administrators — will probably be subject matter that stands a greater chance of being introduced and taught.

To be sure, there are a great many dangers and disadvantages in using tests to measure student learning. Nevertheless, I am convinced that general semantics teaching in the 1980s would greatly benefit from the development of a series of standardized tests or exercises: Tests that would systematically question knowledge of general semantics principles, sampling the various ranges of human affairs and evaluations where such principles are sometimes applied.

To my knowledge, there is only one standardized general semantics test that has been continuously available for many years. It has enjoyed tremendous popularity. Widely used by secondary school and college teachers, it has also found a place in many business and governmental training programs. I am referring to William V. Haney's "Uncritical Inference Test."

In the 1980s general semantics will need many other measuring and learning devices as well conceived and constructed as the "Uncritical Inference Test."