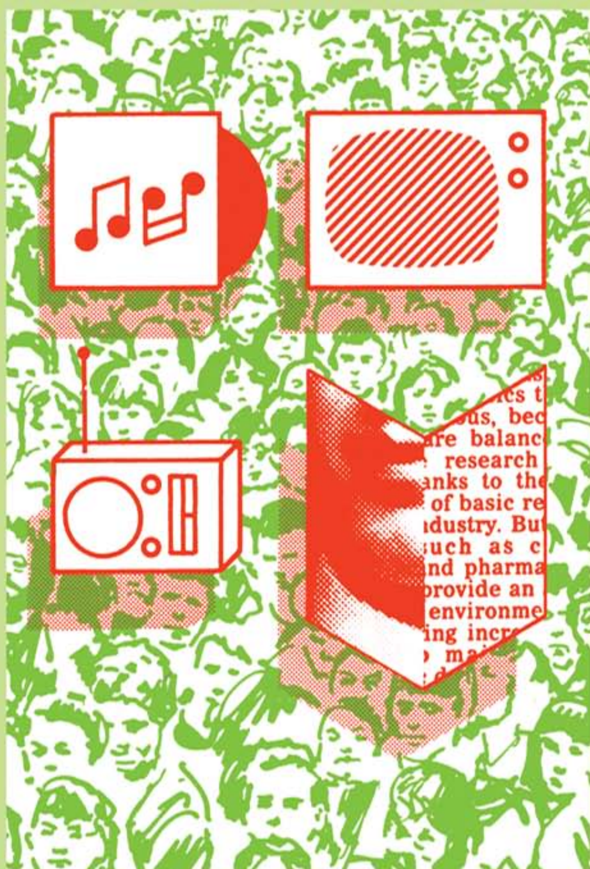
SOCIETY NOW

MEDIA SOCIOLOGY

DAVID BARRAT



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1

Development and approaches

Prologue: seduction of the innocent

YOUTH 'KILLED AFTER A VIDEO SESSION'
(*Daily Mail* headline, 6 July, 1983)

CRUEL MOVIES FAN HACKS 4 TO DEATH
(*Daily Mail* headline, 7 July, 1983)

BAN VIDEO SADISM NOW
(*Daily Mail* headline, 1 July, 1983)

> 'In some families, apparently, children are actually being deliberately shown films of buggery, rape and mutilation. Many see them because they are lying about the home. This the NSPCC believes is a new form of cruelty. The organization consulted all its doctors and psychiatrists who agreed that permanent damage could be done to children's minds by such pornographic and sadistic material, in which the detail is powerfully realistic, as in the depiction

of castration or scenes of someone boring through a human skull by an electric drill, bloodily.' (David Holbrook, 'Opinion' article in *Sunday Times*, 2 January, 1983)

From 'nasty' comics to 'video nasties': a case study

The growth in ownership of video tape-recorders has given birth to a new concern about the effects of the media. The so-called 'video nasty', with its graphic depictions of violence and sexuality, has become a major cause for moral campaigners. That these programmes should exert powerful and corrupting effects on children and young people is seen as obvious, as is the need for their legal control.

It is sometimes easier to be objective about contemporary events by seeking historical parallels. Martin Barker's study (1984a) of the campaign against horror comics in Britain in the 1950s provides just such a comparison.

The anti-comic campaign

The comics concerned were originally American imports aimed at adults. They told, in strip cartoon form, stories of crime and horror. They carried titles such as *Tales from the Crypt*, *Crime Detective*, and the more familiar *Superman*. A taste for this style of reading was first acquired as a result of the comics being imported into Britain for US servicemen stationed there.

The campaign against the comics was, in its own terms, a great success. Begun in 1949, it had by 1955 succeeded in getting passed an Act which outlawed their publication. This effectively removed the comics from the shelves of newsagents within weeks.

The history of these events seems simple. A new form of a medium popular among children provokes spontaneous and virtually unanimous protest from all sections of society. Concern is expressed by teachers, magistrates, parents,

women's organizations, newspapers, and churches, in public meetings and through professional associations such as the National Union of Teachers (NUT). Pressure groups are established – Barker mentions the Comic Campaign Council and the Council for Children's Welfare – which rapidly mobilize public opinion to the 'obvious need for action':

> The comics were universally condemned. They were badly produced, on poor paper with cheap print. They were full of sadistic violence, horrific obsession with death, lustful representations of women. They showed crime in a glamorous light. Nothing was sacred, everything was corrupt. They could do, must do real damage to their young readers. It was an act of simple morality to stop these fly-by-night publishers.
>
> (Barker 1984a)

The result of pressure from all fronts supported by the recommendation of those professionally concerned with the welfare of children, was the Children and Young Persons (Harmful Publications) Act 1955 whose content was influenced strongly by a draft bill produced by the Comics Campaign Council. The Act was effective despite the fact that the penalties it carried were rarely used. Barker found only one record of a prosecution under the Act and that in 1970 – many years after the 'danger' had passed or been superseded.

The hidden history

Such a straightforward account of the events is, according to Barker, an oversimplification. There is a hidden history, a sub-text to the story. Unknown to many of the participants (and, of course, the general public), there were vested interests behind the campaign. Perhaps the most interesting of these was the role played by the British Communist Party. Ironically – because censorship campaigns are often associated with right-wing politics – the campaign against the comics began within the Communist Party.

Following the war in 1945 the Communist Party set out to win popular support by concentrating their efforts in a campaign against 'American Imperialism'. In Britain the rising tide of 'American world domination' was to be held back by attacking all forms of American influence. Such influence was felt through the economic power of American big business, but also through its effect on British culture, for example in the disciplines of sociology and psychology, in films, music, and, of course, the comics. But the campaign against the comics was just part of this wider political aim.

The effect of the comics on their audience was stated in quite specific terms. The crude and negative stereotypes of foreigners (Germans, Russians, 'Japs', and 'Gooks') that the comics contained, served to justify and legitimate the actions of American soldiers in the real world. It was also claimed that young people raised on such comics would, when older, be psychologically prepared to kill, maim, and torture on behalf of American capitalism. So, according to these critics, the comics performed an important socializing or 'brain-washing' function. Anti-semitic propaganda had served, so it was argued, a similar process in Germany in the 1930s – preparing the way for the emergence of fascism. Later in the campaign such specific theories of the effects of the comics disappeared.

Barker argues that the Communist Party took a very low profile in the subsequent development of the campaign in order to encourage maximum public support for it. As a result most of the openly political arguments were removed from the campaign. The case against the comics became a moral one: the defence of 'national decency'. Very little investigation was carried out into the comics themselves. Their perverse nature and effects were seen to be self-evident. Further research would, therefore, have been unnecessary. Increasingly the appeal was to an outraged common sense of decency:

> 'Horryfying in extreme. . . . So far fetched, horrifying, disgusting, would be unhealthy for adults . . . joy in crime

with a figleaf of morality . . . highly improbable and misleading incidents . . . misleading mixture of scientific fact and mumbo-jumbo . . . Sickly, hypocritical presence of moral at end.'

(Pickard cited in Barker 1984a)

Such observations, published in one of the contemporary 'studies' of the comics, are, of course, moral judgements and not objective or testable findings.

The audience – a neglected group

What of the readers of the comics? Barker argues that they were not mostly children but mainly young adults and predominantly working class. The voice of this readership was never heard during the campaign. Of course such people, on whose behalf changes were being sought, had little access to the channels of influence and publicity that were available to the anti-comics campaigners. In addition their isolation prevented them from putting together any coherent defence. The readers and the reformers came from different social worlds. The reformers were chiefly professional middle-class men and women confronted with a working-class culture which they dismissed as perverted and dangerous. No one sought to discover how the magazines were read and interpreted, or whether the comics actually possessed the qualities of corruption that were attributed to them. Had the reformers attempted to look at the comics as works in their own right they might have come up with a less prejudiced and dismissive appraisal of them. In fact, Barker says that his research convinced him that at least some of them possessed genuine merit, skill, and artistry. But the campaigners did not allow for such a possibility.

Great care was taken to limit the scope of the Act only to the comics. These were defined as publications in which the story is told in pictures, which portray 'crimes or acts of violence or cruelty or incidents of a horrible or repulsive

nature' (the Home Secretary introducing the Bill in parliament – quoted in Barker 1984a). Indeed one of the worries raised in the parliamentary debate on the Bill was that the powers that were intended to suppress the comics might be applied elsewhere. But all agreed that the comics themselves were indefensible.

The NUT entered the campaign late, being wary, at first, of what was rightly seen as the political motivation of the campaigners. But as the grounds for objecting to the comics shifted from 'political' to 'common-sense', they put the full force of their professional prestige and influence behind the campaign – with telling results. There were tactical reasons for this last-minute 'conversion'. At a time of pay negotiations the NUT were anxious to establish themselves as *the* professional organization that expressed the interests of children.

Problems of media research

Although not necessarily typical of all media research, what makes the story of the comics campaign in Britiain interesting is that it can be used to show many of the dangers, shortcomings, and difficulties which have bedevilled research into the media.

The involvement of outside agencies and pressure groups in much research into the mass media means that researchers must first look carefully at who has sponsored research and what their interests are. This issue is not unique to media research; it occurs in many fields of sociology concerned with 'social problems'.

Moral entrepreneurs

In the case of the horror comics the readers, who were young and working class, lacked the power and organization to challenge the way their consumption of comics was defined as a social problem by the campaigners. It is clear also from

Barker's account that the groups involved in the campaign had their own vested interests. The NUT was trying to maintain its credibility as the professional group concerned with children's welfare, and the British Communist Party sought to use the campaign as a way of broadening its political support among the public. Howard Becker has coined the term 'moral entrepreneur' to describe those who embark on the enterprise of creating and enforcing new rules:

> 'The prototype of the rule creator ... is the crusading reformer. He is interested in the content of rules. The existing rules do not satisfy him because there is some evil which profoundly disturbs him. He feels that nothing can be right in the world until rules are made to correct it. He operates with an absolute ethic; what he sees is truly and absolutely evil with no qualification. Any means is justified to do away with it. The crusader is fervent and righteous, often self-righteous.'
>
> (Becker 1963: 147–48)

Moral entrepreneurs have played, and continue to play, an important role in pressing for and sponsoring research into mass communication. In Britain the campaign to ban 'video nasties', which has many direct parallels with the anti-comics campaign, provides a recent example of such moral enterprise (see Barker 1984b). As a result much media research has been 'strongly influenced by currents which have little to do with scientific criteria of relevance' (McQuail 1977). There are, of course, other groups and institutions outside the discipline of media studies who have also sponsored a great deal of research. Companies, political parties, and media organizations have all been behind research to discover the effectiveness of their communications. As McQuail concludes:

> 'Scientific investigations have thus been carried out typically in a context shaped by the practical interests of media producers to achieve their specific aims, or by the concern in society to prevent "harmful" effects. Those "effects" of

the media which relate to neither of these have not always been examined with the same zeal. When we come to assess the state of knowledge about the question as a whole we will have to acknowledge a rather large gap on matters which may be most central to understanding the contributions of mass media in modern society.'

(McQuail 1977)

The hypodermic model of the mass media

A second shortcoming found in much of the early research into the mass media can also be illustrated from the example of the comics campaign. This is the belief that the media have almost magical powers to alter the ideas and behaviour of their audience. This is sometimes referred to as the 'hypodermic model' – media messages are seen as being directly injected into the minds of individuals who are powerless to resist. There are two assumptions, common to much of the early research, hidden in this model of the way the media work. The first is often referred to as the idea of 'mass society'. This implies that individuals who make up modern society exist as isolated 'atoms'. This was a view, shared by many early sociologists, that the changes brought about by industrialization had destroyed many of the links between people that were to be found in traditional, pre-industrial communities. This left a society made up of a chaotic mass of individuals who were without any organized community to give their lives shape and meaning. In this world of uncertainty the mass media provided the only point of reference. Mass society produced individuals who were defenceless against the persuasive powers of the media. Media messages pierced the skin with the ease of a hypodermic needle.

Of course, in the case of the comics campaign, the fact that the audience was believed to be made up of children made the persuasive powers of the medium even less resistable. But a concern with the effects of the mass media on children has

been a common theme in much other media research too. It appears in more recent work such as Belson (1978) (see pp. 21–6) and the debate in Britain concerning the effect on children of 'video nasties' (see Barker 1984b).

The audience – vulnerable and isolated

The second assumption hidden in the 'hypodermic model' was a rather crude and oversimplified psychological theory of the way in which media messages act on the individual. This too is illustrated by the campaign against comics in Britain.

A book which was important in the British campaign – *Seduction of the Innocent* – was written by an American, Frederic Wertham (1953). He argued that children find the characters in the comics so appealing that they strongly identify with them – coming to see the world through the eyes of the comic characters – with direct effects on behaviour and attitudes:

> 'Superman (with the big S on his uniform – we should be glad, I suppose that it is not an SS) needs an endless stream of ever new submen, criminals, and "foreign looking" people not only to justify his existence, but even to make it possible. It is this feature that engenders in children either one or the other of two possible attitudes: either they fantasy themselves as supermen, with the attendant prejudices against the submen, or it makes them submissive and receptive to the blandishment of strong men who will solve all their social problems for them – by force.'
>
> (Wertham 1953)

Reading Superman forces children into attitudes of dominance or submissiveness. No credit is given to a child's ability to perceive comic characters as unreal or fantasy figures. Whatever is depicted in the comics is accepted as normal and may be copied.

There seems to be a simple equation implied in much of the