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BOOK READING AUDIENCES AND THE MASS SOCIETY.

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PAST STUDIES ON READING AUDIENCE BEHAVIOR FOCUSED ON DIFFERENTIATING INDIVIDUAL MEMBERS ACCORDING TO THE QUANTITY AND QUALITY OF THE BOOKS THEY READ. THESE STUDIES DID NOT DEAL WITH INTERRELATIONSHIPS AMONG MEMBERS. AN APPROACH WAS NEEDED TO IDENTIFY WHAT CONSTITUTES A READING AUDIENCE AND HOW ITS MEMBERS INTERRELATE. AN AGGREGATE LEVEL APPROACH OFFERS POSSIBILITIES FOR DISTINGUISHING BETWEEN THE CENTER AND THE PERIPHERY IN AN AUDIENCE AND FOR INVESTIGATING INTERRELATIONSHIPS AMONG ITS SUBPUBLICS. THE CENTER-PERIPHERY CONCEPT ASSUMES THAT IN ANY AUDIENCE THERE IS A CENTER, A GROUP MORE KNOWLEDGEABLE WITH THE MEDIUM THAN ARE OTHERS WHO COMPRISE THE PERIPHERY. EXAMPLES OF AGGREGATE LEVEL ANALYSIS ARE CITED. THE FIRST EXAMPLE EXPLAINS THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE SIZE OF AN AUDIENCE AND THE BALANCE OF THE CENTER AND PERIPHERAL READERS. A SECOND EXAMPLE EXAMINES THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ONE READING SUBPUBLIC AND ANOTHER TO DETERMINE HOW DIFFERENT KINDS OF TASTES GO TOGETHER. THE THIRD EXAMPLE COMPARES CENTER AND PERIPHERAL READERS AND INVESTIGATES SOURCES OF BOOKS READ. THIS PAPER WAS PRESENTED AT THE AMERICAN SOCIOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION CONFERENCE (61ST, MIAMI BEACH, AUGUST 1966). (NS)

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This is a brief report of a continuing study of reading in the United States.* The concern of the study is twofold, first to provide current accurate and comprehensive figures as to who reads how much of what, obtained from what source. The second purpose is to advance a little, the theory of cultural process, a field notoriously underconceptualized.

Some of the findings concerned with the qualitative and quantitative aspects of book reading have been reported elsewhere.¹ My concern here is with theoretical tools for understanding the structure and behavior of audiences in general--the mass audience being an important limiting case.

The kind of structural concepts that have typically been used in the analysis of audience behavior have been those which differentiated individuals according to the quantity or the quality of their participation; heavy viewers versus light viewers, high brows versus low brows, the elite versus the mass. While these are useful, indeed inevitable notions, they ignore relationships of audience members to each other or to the producing and distributing components of the particular cultural system or analysis of the whole audience taken as the unit of inquiry. They are aimed at the level of

* I am grateful for the work of Elizabeth McElroy and Sarah Packard for developing some of the statistical materials used below.

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the individual, and generally become the dependent variable in a paradigm which uses demographic factors, age, sex, education, etc. to account for variations in rates and levels of TV viewing, movie going or book reading.² If however the focus is shifted from the individual to the audience as a whole, these concepts can be aggregated to characterize the audience as an entity in analogous terms as were individuals.

One concept particularly inviting in this respect is Edward Shils' differentiation of an audience into periphery and center.³ In any audience this concept assumes there is a group more knowledgeable, more engaged with the medium than others, who at the periphery participate less quantitatively and presumably with less knowledge, and without self-sustaining standards of judgment. The survey materials on book reading mentioned above provide empirical exemplification of these concepts. The definition of center and periphery is based on a quantitative measure of the amount of reading. This procedure unfortunately simplifies the potential richness of the center-periphery concept since the quality of reading has to be ignored. On the other hand there is the advantage of comparability of definition and precision of measurement. A cross section of American adults were asked in 1965 about the extent of their reading in terms of numbers of books read and how often they read various types of books. These types are broadly defined and include the familiar categories: mysteries, plays and poetry, science, history, and so forth. In spite of the looseness of these terms, they appear familiar to the individual and people had no difficulty in stating whether they read each type frequently, occasionally, hardly ever or never.

Qualitative depth interviews as well as the more structured questionnaires satisfied us moreover that people have a definite idea of

The first example deals with the relationship between the size of an audience and the balance of center to peripheral members. The data presented in Table 1 are taken from the reading survey discussed above. Again the disclaimer is made that while these sub-publics of readers are not as meaningfully delineated as they might be, they are more precisely defined. The "center" readers are those who said they read a particular type of book frequently, the peripheral readers are those who read it only occasionally, and the whole universe of readers includes those who have read a book or more within a year. Not unexpectedly there is considerable variation in both the size of these reading audiences as well as the relative prominence of the core readers.

The rank order correlation between these two orderings is 0.77, somewhat surprising, since the ordinary expectation would not be that the larger the audience the larger its center. Just the opposite assumption I would think underlies the thinking of most commentary on the mass media--the larger the audience the fewer, proportionately, will be the people with knowledge, standards and sophistication. Yet a closer inspection of these data, laid out in a scattergram indicating the percentages rather than the rank orders, suggests a more complex relationship, either curvilinear, or the mixture of two dissimilar sets of groups thrown together. In any case, the issue of audience size and its structure--as to center and periphery--appears to be domesticable, and thus allows systematic analysis of audiences of various size or types at a given time, or the same audience over time provided individual level data on degree or quality of participation is available.

The second example illustrating the aggregate level approach is the relationships between one reading sub-public and another, in terms of their

overlapping membership. This concern is related to the perennial curiosity about how different kinds of tastes go with each other--which are culturally close together, which are far apart. The major efforts with this topic have generally been to chart the extent to which high middle and low browed preferences devolve on entirely different audiences or whether there is any considerable overlap. The pioneering but neglected work in this field, that of Babette Kass,⁴ foreshadowed a more complex analysis of the sociometry of a whole series of magazines, differing not only in brow level but in content, periodicity, and so forth. Still, most analyses of this type are on the level of the individual, not the audience, and they tend to have a conception of the participant as being either in or out. The present approach to repeat is to consider the audience as the unit and to distinguish center from periphery. The comparison of the two book audiences then, yields a nine-fold table, nine types--the confrontation of center, peripheral and non-reader of two subjects. The particular configuration of these nine types characterizes with considerable richness the mutual relationships between the two. Table 2, presented simply as an illustration, shows the distribution of frequent, occasional and non-readers of poetry and science. The extent of total overlap here is 23 per cent and the center overlap only 10 per cent.

The interesting questions in comparing the different pairs (or ultimately trios and quartets of the various sub-publics) lie in the differences between the center and the periphery of a particular audience as a function of their differential engagement in the other audiences. For example the total overlapping of health and self-improvement book readers is 52 per cent and the overlap between the two centers is 27 per

cent, about half. In contrast the total overlap in readers between self-improvement books and fiction is 42 per cent but the overlap of these two centers is only 12 per cent, less than a third as much. This must mean that the core reader of self-improvement books is much more knowledgeable and involved in health concerns than in fiction, compared to the peripheral reader of the self-improvement book.

The implications of this fact are important for the diffusion and feedback processes of this type of book. In general, does the core reader respond faster, or more slowly to the book publishing industry than the peripheral reader? Do the same channels reach and influence each? Do the core and the periphery develop different standards of judgment, even different tastes within the rubric of a given types of books as a result of its differential experience with the various kinds of books? These are the kinds of questions that will require a much more intensive examination into reading and into the social relations between readers.

The only clue offered at this point, and this is the third example, is that core readers particularly those who belong to several cores, get their books in different places from those who are on the periphery. And more interesting, it appears that the core reader is indeed more likely to use bookstores, giving him more immediate visibility to the book publishing industry. The peripheral reader tends to borrow more books from friends than does the core readers. This suggests the core reader is acting to some extent as an opinion leader. Indeed the center-periphery concept is a macroscopic level counterpart of the microscopic opinion-leadership concept. The task ahead is to provide the aggregate level analysis with the same degree of empirical support that has been lavished on the search for opinion leaders, and to find a level of theory at the aggregate level to render the facts understandable.

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NOTES

1. Philip H. Ennis, Adult Book Reading in the United States, Report No. 105, National Opinion Research Center, Chicago, 1965.
2. See for example H. Wilensky, "Mass Society and Mass Culture: Interdependence or Independence," in American Sociological Review, Vol. 29, No. 2, p. 173; or G. Steiner, The People Look at Television, Knopf, 1964.
3. Edward Shils, "Center and Periphery" in Personal Knowledge, ed.; Edward Shils, Free Press, 1961. Also see Hayda, Jan, An American Paradox: People and Books in a Metropolis, unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Chicago, 1963, who also uses the concept for the analysis of reading.
4. Kass, B., "Overlapping Magazine Reading," in Communications Research, 1948-9, ed., P. F. Lazarsfeld and F. Stanton, New York, 1949.

TABLE 1

CENTER-PERIPHERY BALANCE AND RELATIVE SIZE
AMONG READING SUB-PUBLICS

Type of Reading	Per Cent "Center" Readers	Rank	Per Cent Readers In Total Sample	Rank
Fiction	53	1	71 †	1
Sports, hobbies . .	47	2	69	2
Religion	44	3	54	4
Mysteries	40	4	53	5
History	39	5	66	3
Social science . . .	36	6	41	8
Science	35	7	30	10
Plays, poetry . . .	34	8	38	9
Health	32	9	51	6
Self-improvement . .	31	10	47	7

Total readers in sample = (712)

Table 2

INTERSECTION OF THE POETRY AND SCIENCE SUB-PUBLICS

		<u>Poetry</u>			
		Center	Periphery	Non-reader	
<u>Science</u>	Center	15	16	43 [†]	74
	Periphery	17	40	80	138
	Non-reader	58	119	318	496
		90	175	441	N=706