Some Reasons Why Information Campaigns Fail

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"Even if all the physical *barriers to communication were known and removed," the authors contend, "there would remain many* psychological *barriers to the free flow of ideas." For example, interested people acquire more information than the uninterested; people seek the sort of facts which are congenial to their existing attitudes; different groups interpret the same information differently. This study is based on an analysis of national samples of the American people.*

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The Charter of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization contains the following significant statement:

> "... the States parties to this Constitution ... are agreed and determined to develop and to increase the means of communication between their peoples and to employ these means for the purposes of mutual understanding and a truer and more perfect knowledge of each other's lives. To realize this purpose the Organization will ... recommend such international agreements as may be necessary to promote the free flow of ideas by word and image."

As a preliminary step, the Preparatory Commission of UNESCO has instructed the Secretariat to survey the obstacles in the way of such a program.[1] These obstacles to be surveyed include such things as the breakdown and inadequacy of existing communication facilities in many parts of the world, and the political, commercial and economic restrictions which hamper the free exchange of information throughout the United Nations.

But even if all these *physical* barriers to communication were known and removed, there would remain many *psychological* barriers to the free flow of ideas. It is the purpose of this paper to demonstrate some of these psychological factors that impede communication and thereby to formulate certain principles and guides which must be considered in mass information campaigns. Existence of these psychological factors will be demonstrated by a variety of data gathered in recent surveys of the American public by the National Opinion Research Center, and one general truth is implied throughout the discussion:

The physical barriers to communication merely impede the *supply* of information. In order to increase public knowledge, not only is it necessary to

[1] See "UNESCO's Program of Mass Communication: I," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 10, No. 4 (1946).

present more information, but it is essential that the mass audience *be exposed to* and that it *absorb* the information. And in order to insure such exposure and absorption, *the psychological characteristics of human beings must be taken into account.*

To assume a perfect correspondence between the nature and amount of material presented in an information campaign and its absorption by the public, is to take a naive view, for the very nature and degree of public exposure to the material is determined to a large extent by certain psychological characteristics of the people themselves.[2] A number of these psychological characteristics are discussed below under the following topics:

- The Chronic "Know-Nothing's" in Relation to Information Campaigns
- The Role of Interest in Increasing Exposure
- Selective Exposure Produced by Prior Attitudes
- Selective Interpretation Following Exposure
- Differential Changes in Attitudes After Exposure

There Exists a Hard Core of Chronic "Know-Nothing's"

All persons do not offer equal targets for information campaigns. Surveys consistently find that a certain proportion of the population is not familiar with any particular event. Offhand, it might be thought that information concerning that event was not distributed broadly enough to reach them, but that this group would still have an equal chance of exposure to other information. Yet, when the knowledge of this same group is measured with respect to a second event, they tend also to have little information in that area. And similarly, they will have little or no information concerning a third event.

If all persons provided equal targets for exposure, and the sole determinant of public knowledge were the magnitude of the given information, there would be no reason for the same individuals always to show a relative lack of knowledge. *Instead, there is something about the uninformed which makes them harder to reach, no matter what the level or nature of the information.*

Thus, in May 1946, NORC asked a question to determine public knowledge of the report of the Anglo-American Committee on Palestine which recommended the admission of 100,000 Jewish immigrants to that country. Only 28 per cent of the national sample expressed any awareness of this report. It might be assumed that the remaining 72 per cent were ready and willing to be exposed, but that there had been too little information about the report. Yet Table 1 shows that this unaware group consistently tended to have less awareness of other information about the international scene which had been much more widely reported.

The size of this generally uninformed group in the population may be indicated by computing an index of general knowledge based on all five information questions in the field of foreign affairs, which were asked on that particular survey. The five subjects covered by these questions were:

[2] For a theoretical discussion of the problem see Daniel Katz, "Psychological Barriers to Communication," *The Annals*, March, 1947.

1. The Palestine report spoken of above [1][3]
2. The Acheson-Lillienthal report on atomic energy [2]
3. The Paris meeting of the Big Four Foreign Ministers, then in progress [3]
4. The proposed loan to England, then being debated in Congress [4]
5. The political status of Palestine, the fact that she is ruled by England [5]

TABLE 1

Per cent Aware of:	*Group Which is Not Aware of Palestine Report*	*Group Which is Aware of Palestine Report*
Acheson-Lillienthal report on atomic energy	32%	64%
Spring 1946 meeting of Foreign Ministers in Paris	39%	85%
Proposed loan to England	73%	96%
	N=931	N=358

Table 2 shows how the population divided in its awareness of these five items. As may be seen, roughly one person out of seven reported no awareness of *any* of the five items, and approximately one person in three had knowledge of no more than *one* of them. This generally uninformed group, therefore, is of considerable magnitude.[4] It is possible, of course, that the existence of this group may be related to external factors of accessibility to information media, and that if the information were somehow channelled into their vicinity, they would soon become exposed. For example, information on foreign affairs is probably less easily available to small-town residents than it is to city-dwellers, and we find a relationship, as shown in Table 3, between size of community and awareness of our five items. These differences, however, are relatively small, in comparison with the psychological differences to be shown later in Table 4 and elsewhere. The next section discusses the effect of certain psychological factors on level of knowledge.

TABLE 2

Aware of:	*Per cent of National Sample*
No items	14%
One item	18
Two items	20
Three items	17
Four items	19
Five items	12
Total sample	100%
	N=1292

TABLE 3

Size of Community	*Mean Score on Knowledge Index Number of Items Known*
Metropolitan Districts over one million	2.81
Metropolitan Districts under one million	2.45
Cities 2,500 to 50,000	2.38
Towns under 2,500	2.28
Farm	2.03

[3] Figures in brackets refer to actual question-wordings which are reported in the note at the end of this article.

[4] If anything, the size of the group is under-represented, for two reasons: (1) The respondent's claim to awareness was accepted at face value, without any check on his actual knowledge; (2) Polls consistently tend to over-sample the more literate, higher socio-economic groups in the population.

Interested People Acquire the Most Information

The importance of *motivation* in achievement or learning, or in assimilating knowledge, has been consistently shown in academic studies. Yet this important factor is often ignored in information campaigns, amid all the talk of "increasing the flow of information." The widest possible dissemination of material may be ineffective if it is not geared to the public's interests.

It is well known that opinion polls can measure areas of knowledge and ignorance, but the complementary areas of apathy and interest have been more often overlooked. Yet they can be just as readily measured, and they are highly significant in understanding the factors behind a given level of knowledge.

NORC, in a poll taken in May 1946, measured the public's interest in eight different issues in the field of foreign affairs [6]. These issues were:

1. Our relations with Russia
2. The atomic bomb
3. Our policy toward Germany
4. The United Nations organization
5. The British loan
6. The meeting of Foreign Ministers in Paris
7. Our relations with Franco Spain
8. Our policy toward Palestine

Public interest varied widely in these eight issues, ranging from 77 per cent of the national sample which reported "considerable" or "great" interest in our relations with Russia to 28 per cent which reported "considerable" or "great" interest in our policy toward Palestine. Thus, it is clear that each specific information campaign does not start with the same handicap in terms of public apathy. Motivation is high on some issues, low on others.

Nevertheless, there is consistent evidence that interest in foreign affairs tends to be *generalized*. Some people are interested in many or all of the issues; another large group is apathetic toward most or all of them. Intercorrelations (based on approximately 1290 cases) between interest in one issue and interest in each of the other seven, definitely establish this point. The 28 tetrachoric correlation coefficients range from .40 to .82, with a median r of .58. Table 4 shows how the population divides in its interest in these eight issues.

TABLE 4

	Per cent of Total Sample Expressing Considerable or Great Interest	
"High Interest"		37%
All eight issues	11%	
Seven issues	11	
Six issues	15	
"Medium Interest"		40
Five issues	15	
Four issues	14	
Three issues	11	
"Low Interest"		23
Two issues	7	
One issue	5	
None of them	11	
		100%
		N=1292

It will be noticed that 11 per cent of the sample expressed little or no interest in any of the eight issues, and that another 12 per cent were interested in only one or two of them. Almost one-quarter of the population, therefore, reported interest in no more than two of the eight issues—a state of apathy

all the more significant when it is remembered that the list included such overpowering subjects as the atomic bomb and our relations with Germany and Russia, and that the respondent's own estimate of his degree of interest, doubtless subject to prestige considerations, was accepted without question.

The close relationship between apathy on the one hand, and ignorance of information materials on the other, is shown in Table 5. It is a likely assump-

TABLE 5

	Per cent Who Have Heard of Acheson Report on Atomic Energy	
Respondents with great or considerable interest in atomic bomb	48%	N=953
Respondents with little or no interest in atomic bomb	20	N=337
	Per cent Who Have Heard of Anglo-American Report on Palestine	
Respondents with great or considerable interest in Palestine policy	51%	N=365
Respondents with little or no interest in Palestine policy	19	N=921

tion that both the contrasted groups in the table had equal *opportunity* to learn about the two reports. Yet the information reached approximately half of the interested group, and only about one-fifth of the disinterested.[6]

The relationship between interest and knowledge can be demonstrated in a different way, if we compare the scores of each of our interest groups on our knowledge index. As seen in Table 6, at each stage of increasing interest, knowledge rises correspondingly.

TABLE 6

Interested in:	*Mean Score on Knowledge Index*
No items	.85
One item	1.42
Two items	1.12
Three items	1.89
Four items	2.37
Five items	2.64
Six items	3.15
Seven items	3.50
Eight items	3.81
	N=1292

It can be argued, of course, that the exposed people became interested after they had been exposed to the information, and that the disinterested persons are apathetic only because they were not exposed. It is probable that the two factors *are* interdependent; as people learn more, their interest increases, and as their interest increases, they are impelled to learn more. Nevertheless, from the point of view of initiating a *specific* campaign at some point in time, it remains true that in the case even of outstanding public issues, large groups in the population admit "little or no interest" in the problem.

This fact cannot be ignored by those in charge of information campaigns. Such groups constitute a special problem which cannot be solved simply by "increasing the flow of information." *Scientific surveys are needed to de-*

[6] Lazarsfeld reports a similar finding on the relationship of interest to exposure to political information. See Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet, *The People's Choice*, New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1944, p. 79.

termine who these people are, why they lack interest, and what approach can best succeed in reaching them.

People Seek Information Congenial to Prior Attitudes

Information campaigns, while they involve the presentation of *facts*, nevertheless present materials which may or may not be congenial with the attitudes of any given individual. Lazarsfeld,[6] in describing the exposure of a sample panel to political campaign propaganda, concludes that "People selected political material in accord with their own taste and bias. Even those who had not yet made a decision (on their vote) exposed themselves to propaganda which fit their not-yet-conscious political predispositions."

Our evidence from polling national samples in other information areas supports the view that people tend to expose themselves to information which is congenial with their prior attitudes, and to avoid exposure to information which is not congenial. Although it was not possible to administer before-and-after tests of attitudes, the following technique offers indirect evidence to support the argument of selective exposure.

National samples were asked if they had heard or read anything about a given piece of information. The entire sample was then given the gist of the information in one or two sentences. (In the case of those who had admitted familiarity with the material, the description was prefaced by some such phrase as, "Well, as you remember . . .") Immediately following the description of the information, the entire sample was then asked some relevant attitude question.

We found in every case that the group who reported prior exposure to the information had a different attitudinal reaction from those without prior exposure. One could assume that this difference reflected the influence of the information on those previously exposed, except that, as described above, *both groups*, before being asked the attitude question, had been supplied with identical descriptions of the information in question.

Thus, in June 1946, a national sample of the adult population was asked whether they had heard or read about the Anglo-American Committee report on Palestine [1]. Every respondent was then either told or reminded of the essential provisions of the report, and was asked whether he favored United States assistance in keeping order in Palestine if 100,000 additional Jews were admitted to that country [7]. As seen in Table 7, those with prior knowledge of the report were significantly more favorable toward such assistance.

Similarly, in April 1946, a national sample was asked whether they had heard or read about the recent joint statement by England, France, and the United States which denounced the Franco government of Spain [8]. Included in the question was the gist of the statement: "the hope that General Franco's government in Spain would soon be followed by a more democratic one." The entire sample was then asked its attitude toward this country's Spanish policy [9]. Again, those who had prior knowledge of the three-power statement were significantly more hostile in their attitudes toward Franco. See Table 7.

[6] *Op. cit.*, p. 80.

TABLE 7

	Per cent of Those With Opinions Who Favor U.S. Aid in Keeping Order in Palestine	
Previous knowledge of Committee report	36%	N=339
No previous knowledge	30	N=805

	Per cent of Those With Opinions Who Favor Breaking Relations With Franco	
Previous knowledge of Three-Power statement	32%	N=657
No previous knowledge	21	N=268

It is true that those who learned about the report or statement for the first time during the interview were more inclined to offer no opinion when questioned on their attitudes, but the above table excludes the "No opinion" group, and comparisons are based only on those with definite opinions.

The differences reported, which are in all likelihood not due to chance, suggest the phenomenon of "selective exposure" to information. In both cases, every respondent was aware of the contents of the statement or report when he answered the question on policy. Yet in each case, those with *prior* knowledge of the information had significantly different attitudes. It would appear, therefore, that persons reached by the Palestine report were those who were more likely in the first place to favor United States assistance there, rather than that they favored U.S. assistance because they were familiar with the information contained in the report. Similarly, it would seem that the group which had prior knowledge of the statement on Spain was already more anti-Franco in their attitudes, rather than that they became more anti-Franco by virtue of exposure.

The fact that people tend to become exposed to information which is congenial with their prior attitudes is another factor which must be considered by those in charge of information campaigns. Merely "increasing the flow" is not enough, if the information continues to "flow" in the direction of those already on your side!

People Interpret the Same Information Differently

It has just been shown that it is false to assume a perfect correspondence between public exposure to information and the amount of material distributed. It is equally false to assume that exposure, once achieved, results in a uniform interpretation and retention of the material.

In a series of experimental studies beginning with the work of Bartlett,[7] and carried on by a host of other investigators such as Margolies, Clark, Nadel, and Murphy,[8] it has been consistently demonstrated that a person's perception and memory of materials shown to him are often distorted by his wishes, motives, and attitudes. One demonstration of these general psycho-

[7] F. C. Bartlett, *Remembering*, New York: Macmillan Co., 1932.

[8] B. Margolies, unpublished M.A. thesis, Columbia University, New York City; K. Clark, "Some Factors Influencing the Remembering of Prose Material," *Archives of Psychology*, No. 253, 1940; S. F. Nadel, "A Field Experiment in Racial Psychology," *British Journal of Psychology*, 1937, Vol. 28, 195-211; and G. Murphy and J. M. Levine, "The Learning and Forgetting of Controversial Material," *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 1943, Vol. 38, 507-518.

logical findings in the area of international affairs is available in a recent NORC survey.

In September 1946, a national sample was asked whether they thought that the newspapers *they read* made Russia out to look better than she really is, worse than she really is, or whether they presented accurate information about Russia [10]. The same survey also asked a question to determine where the respondent put the blame for Russian-American disagreements [11]. When the sample was classified into two groups—those who blamed Russia entirely and those who put the responsibility on both countries or on the United States alone—there were revealed striking differences in beliefs as to whether Russia was being presented fairly or unfairly in the newspapers they read (see Table 8). It is clear from this finding that people selectively discount the information they are exposed to, in the light of their prior attitudes.

TABLE 8

	Per cent Who Say Their Newspapers Make Russia Look Worse Than She Really Is	
Blame Russia entirely for Russian-American disagreements	41%	N=458
Blame United States entirely or blame both countries	54	N=168

The finding is all the more striking when one considers the fact that people tend to read the particular newspapers which are congenial to their own attitudes and beliefs. Thus, one would expect the anti-Russian group to be reading newspapers which, if studied by means of objective content analysis, would be found to slant their editorial content against Russia. Similarly, one would expect the pro-Russian group to read newspapers which, if measured objectively, would be found to emphasize favorable news about Russia. Despite this, the anti-Russian group is *less* likely to say *their* newspapers present Russia unfavorably, while the pro-Russian group is *more* likely to say *their* newspapers present Russia unfavorably.

Here, then, is another psychological problem that faces those responsible for information campaigns. Exposure in itself is not always sufficient. People will interpret the information in different ways, according to their prior attitudes.

Information Does Not Necessarily Change Attitudes

The principle behind all information campaigns is that the disseminated information will alter attitudes or conduct. There is abundant evidence in all fields, of course, that informed people actually do react differently to a problem than uninformed people do. But it is naive to suppose that information always affects attitudes, or that it affects all attitudes equally. The general principle needs serious qualification.

There is evidence, based on investigations made with academic samples, that individuals, once they are exposed to information, change their views *differentially*, each in the light of his own *prior* attitude. Data gathered by NORC in recent national surveys show that these academic findings are equally applicable to the entire adult population.

In a continuing study of attitudes to-

ward the proposed British loan, conducted between December 1945 and February 1946, it was found that a significant factor influencing attitudes toward the loan was the belief that this country would or would not get something out of it economically [12]. As shown by Table 9, those who were of the opinion that the loan held advantages to this country were strongly in favor, while those of a contrary opinion, or doubtful, were overwhelmingly opposed to the loan.

TABLE 9

	Per cent Who Approve Loan to England	
We will get advantages from the loan	66%	N=265
Don't know if advantages	29	N=291
We will not get advantages	20	N=294

Furthermore, 39 per cent of those who expressed approval of the loan mentioned some economic advantage as their reason, while 75 per cent of those opposed listed an economic argument. Under these circumstances, it was logical to suppose that attitudes could be changed toward approval of the loan, by informing the public of its economic advantages to the United States. It was not possible to conduct a before-and-after test of this thesis, but some interesting findings were revealed by a study of two equivalent samples which were polled simultaneously.

One of these samples was given the appropriate information before being questioned on their attitude. They were told that England had agreed to pay the money back with interest over a period of years, and that England had further agreed to take definite steps to remove restrictions on their trade with us and to join us in promoting world trade in general.[9] They were then asked whether they approved or disapproved of lending England the specified amount [13]. This was the experimental sample. The control sample was simply asked whether they approved or disapproved of the proposed loan, on the basis of what they had heard about it, with no additional information supplied them [4].

The experiment proved that the given information did materially change attitudes toward the loan. The experimental sample registered a 14 per cent higher "Approve" vote than did the equivalent control sample which was not given the information. But this over-all comparison obscured the *differential* effect of the information.

For example, there was no difference between the two samples in the proportion of "Disapprovers" who gave an economic argument for their disapproval. Fifty-one per cent of those in the control group who were opposed gave as their reason that "England won't pay us back," and 50 per cent of those in the experimental group who were opposed offered the same argument—in spite of the fact that they had been specifically informed of England's agreement to return the money with interest. It was apparent that a large group of those opposed to the loan were rooted to their belief that the money would not be repaid, and the mere information that England had *agreed* to

[9] This sample was also informed that President Truman had asked Congress to approve the loan, an additional prestige factor probably having some persuasive effect.

repay the loan was of no effect in changing their attitudes.

Table 10 shows another significant differential effect of the information. Among those who were already favorably disposed toward England, the information given to the experimental group was sufficient to sway a large proportion toward approval of the loan [14]. Less than half of this group friendly to England favored the loan in the control sample, but in the experimental sample, which was given the information, the proportion rises to 70 per cent. But among those with hostile or suspicious attitudes toward England, the information had *no effect whatever*. This group was overwhelmingly opposed to the loan without the information, and they remained overwhelmingly opposed to it even when they were exposed to the information.

Conclusions

The above findings indicate clearly that those responsible for information campaigns cannot rely simply on "increasing the flow" to spread their information effectively. The psychological barriers we have pointed out create real problems for those charged with the task of informing the public, and in many cases public opinion surveys offer the only means by which these problems can be recognized, and thereby overcome.

Surveys are already widely used to provide the information director with scientific knowledge of the quantitative distribution of his material. They can tell him how many people have been reached by his information, and more important, which particular groups have not been reached. Surveys, too, can quite easily measure public interest in information materials and areas, thus providing him with accurate knowledge of the handicaps his program faces within various population groups.

But on a different and higher level, surveys can inform the information director of the whole structure of attitudes on any public issue. They can tell him the major factors affecting public opinion on the issue, and the relative influence of these various factors in determining attitudes. They can tell to what extent information has reached the public and how far it has changed existing opinions. They can also tell what information is still needed and what aspects of it must be stressed in order to reach the unexposed or unsympathetic groups.

Psychological barriers to information campaigns are readily admitted by those who stop to consider the point, but they seem often to be overlooked in the general eagerness simply to distribute *more* information. The data we have cited in this paper are merely those which happen to be available from recent NORC surveys, but the kinds of barriers we have mentioned apply eternally to all types of public

TABLE 10

Per cent Approving Loan Among Those Who:	*Control Sample (Not exposed to Information)*	*Experimental Sample (Exposed to Information)*
Trust England to cooperate with us	45% N=619	70% N=242
Do not trust England to cooperate	17 N=231	18 N=133

information. By documenting the very real effect that these psychological barriers have on public exposure to and interpretation of information materials, we hope we will encourage a proportionately greater attention to these intangible factors on the part of those who plan and carry out programs involving mass communication.

NOTE

Questions Referred to in Text of Article

1. Did you hear or read anything about the recent report by the Anglo-American Committee on Palestine?

2. Did you hear or read anything about the report on the control of atomic energy, which was published by the State Department a few weeks ago? It's sometimes called the Acheson report.

3. Have you heard or read anything about the recent meeting in Paris where Secretary of State Byrnes has been talking with the foreign ministers of England, France, and Russia?

4. Have you heard about the recent proposals for a United States loan to England, and for other economic and financial agreements between the two countries? (*If "Yes"*) In general, do you approve or disapprove of these proposals?

5. As far as you know, is Palestine an independent country, or is she ruled by someone else? (*If "Someone else"*) Do you happen to know what country does rule her?

6. We'd like to know how much interest the public takes in some of these questions. For instance, how much interest do you take in news about (*each item below*)—a great deal of interest, a considerable amount, only a little, or none at all? (The United Nations, Our policy toward Palestine, The proposed loan to England, Our policy toward Germany, Our relations with Franco Spain, The atomic bomb, The recent meeting of foreign ministers in Paris, Our relations with Russia.)

7. (As you remember) The report recommends that 100,000 more Jewish refugees be admitted to Palestine in spite of protests by the Arabs there. President Truman has said he thinks this ought to be done. Now England says that the United States ought to help her keep order in Palestine if trouble breaks out between the Jews and the Arabs. Do you think we *should* help keep order there, or should we keep out of it?

8. Now about Spain. Have you heard about the recent statement, in which the United States joined with England and France to express the hope that General Franco's government in Spain would soon be followed by a more democratic one?

9. Which one of these three statements comes closest to *your* opinion about our government's policy toward Spain? (*Card handed to respondent*)

A. We should go even further in opposing Franco, and should break diplomatic relations with his government.

B. It was a good thing to speak out against Franco, but we have gone far enough for the present.

C. We have already gone too far in working against Franco, and are interfering in Spain's internal affairs.

10. Do you think the newspapers you read generally make Russia look better or worse than she really is?

11. In the disagreements between Russia and the United States, do you think one of the countries is entirely to blame, or do you think both countries have something to do with the misunderstanding?

12. Aside from getting paid interest on the loan, do you know whether the United States would be getting anything else out of the deal—that is, would *we* be getting any advantages or concessions? (*If "Yes"*) What?

13. Under these proposals, we would lend England nearly four billion dollars, which they have agreed to pay back with interest during the next fifty years. England has also agreed to take definite steps to remove restrictions on our trade with them, and to join us in promoting world trade in general. President Truman has now asked Congress to approve this plan. Do you think Congress should or should not approve it? (*Unless "Don't know"*) Why do you think so?

14. In general, do you think England can be trusted to cooperate with us in the future, or don't you think so?