DRAFT MEMORANDUM   October 10, 1951

TO: Rowan Gaither

FROM: Hans Speier, Donald Marquis, Bernard Berelson

You have asked us to set down our thoughts about the proper development of an operating program in communication for the Foundation. That is, what should be (1) the major objectives and (2) the measures to reach ~~them~~ to be employed in any efforts by the Foundation to inform the public or to change popular attitudes, as in the case of the activities of the TV Workshop, the Fund for Adult Education, etc.

We feel that the best way to meet this assignment is to mention several of the basic assumptions usually involved in such operating programs and then to comment upon them. Obviously, we do not mean to suggest that what the Foundation is now doing in this field rests upon such assumptions. All we mean to do is to raise the general question in a form that seems appropriate to us.

It should be clear that this is only the roughest sort of memorandum, that it is meant primarily to clarify the climate of opinion among ourselves with reference to these questions, and that it is intended only for internal consumption.

Typical Assumptions of Mass Communication Program

A. **Assumptions Referring to the Nature of the Audience**

1. That it is desirable to reach as many people as possible with the intended content.

   This does not distinguish among the types of people to be reached, which is one of the first things any operating program ought to do. The larger the audience, the more heterogeneous it is, and hence the less particularized the content can be. Reaching fewer people in their specilized capacities would ordinarily be much more effec-

tive than trying to get through to "the general public", which does not often listen to serious informational programs with much attention anyway.

2. That communication programs directed at a general, undifferentiated audience will be reasonably effective.

> This seems to be true only under one limiting condition, namely, that one is after a reinforcement of previously held attitudes of a wide public (e.g., the righteousness of the US in foreign affairs) and not at a genuine conversion or change of mind.

3. That differentiation of audience, when it does occur, must be limited to the usual census type of characteristic (e.g., age or sex or occupation).

> For many purposes, of course, this is a completely satisfactory limitation, and a good deal of highly effective communication goes on in these terms. At the same time, however, for objective dealing with attitude change and such matters, it should be more useful to attempt to differentiate the audience in terms of their importance in the communication system of the community - that is, by seeking to identify and then to concentrate upon the opinion leaders in the community regardless of the census categories in which they fall.

B. With Reference to Means (channels and content)

4. That channels reaching larger numbers of people are for that reason preferable to channels reaching smaller numbers.

> This is involved in what has already been said. Certainly it seems that specialized channels are more efficient than the general channels for the types of purposes pursued by the Foundation.

5. That the more "visible" the program is, the more impact it will have upon the public.

By "visibility" here we mean appearance on a major network or in a widely circulated popular magazine like Life. Visibility in this sense should not be taken for real impact upon people's minds, which is more likely to come from the invisible channels of informal and personal communication.

6. That communication methods successful in selling products are also successful in selling ideas.

Obviously, it is much harder to sell the latter than the former, primarily because of the difference between changing behavior and channeling behavior. The subject's predispositions are ordinarily so much stronger in the area of ideas that different methods are needed to affect them. In addition, there is the likelihood that the ideas one can sell in this limited sense are not worth selling anyway.

7. That slightly increased availability of desirable content will have substantial results.

Certainly, the easy availability of communication content does have an effect upon people's attention. However, it seems to take major changes in availability to effect major changes in attention and impact. In other words, adding one "educational program" to radio and leaving everything else the same will not have much of the desired effect. It would take a major shift in availability to "force" a major impact.

8. That direct methods of achieving communication objectives are more effective than indirect.

> Attacking major attitudinal objectives by a head-on confrontation is usually not very effective, for obvious reasons. The use of indirect content, and if possible indirect channels, will probably get further.

9. That communication content without action- or use-orientation is still reasonably effective in influencing behavior.

> Too many communication programs designed for social welfare ends are deficient in that they simply urge the desired state of affairs and leave the audience without any specific, concrete notion of what it is supposed to do about it. Such diffuse recommendations that the audience act responsibly or morally are not likely to strike home. In these terms the explicit direction to "buy X soap" is better than the general admonition to "love thy neighbor."

C. With Reference to Attention and Comprehension

10. That the audience will give equal attention to content equally available, or that all segments of the audience will give equal attention.

> This is just wrong. The predispositions of the audience - that is, its characteristics, attitudes, interests, etc. - are ordinarily quite effective in determining attention. This fact, incidentally, is at the core of the communication problem: the people

one ordinarily reaches with socially desirable cam-
paigns are the people who need convincing least.
(That is, the people who give attention to campaigns
for minority tolerance are the people who hold the
"right" attitudes already, those who listen to edu-
cational programs are the already educated, etc.)
Thus, the people one wants most to reach are the
people hardest to attract.

11. That the audience will directly perceive and comprehend
the content as presented.

This is also wrong, for the same reasons indicated
above. People have all sorts of defenses against
uncongenial ideas and they are quick to bring them
into play.

D. <u>With Reference to Effects and Consequences</u> (where "effects"
refers to changes in the audience and "consequences" to changes
in institutions or policies beyond the audience)

12. That an increase in the supply of informational and edu-
cational materials will result in desirable changes in
attitude on the part of a reasonably large number of
people.

For various reasons indicated above, this does not
follow.

13. That an increase in the supply of informational or educa-
tional materials will result in an increase in the incidence

of "rational decisions."

What people do with information (in terms of bolster-
ing their own prior positions) is much more significant
than what information does to people.

14. That an increase in the supply of informational and educa-
tional materials will result in increased political partici-
pation and interest.

Just as there is often no direct relation between
information and attitudes, so is there none between
attitudes and behavior. And this should be added to
the general fact that the people who give attention to
such material are primarily those already involved in
the types of activities indicated.

15. That desired changes in information and/or attitude on the
part of the general public will somehow result in desirable
impact upon governmental policy (or upon such conditions as
international tension, etc.).

The effect which "public opinion" has upon decision
making in government is not clear. In any case, it
seems that there is a wide latitude for action within
the general limitations of "public opinion" and hence
that its impact is by no means simple and direct.
Obviously, there are instances in which changes on the
part of a few organized pressure groups or a few key
people are more important than changes in mass opinion.
And here, too, governmental policy probably changes
opinions faster than opinions change policy.

16. That increased political participation on the part of people
    generally will result in wiser political decisions at the
    governmental levels.

    This also needs analysis along the lines of the pre-
    ceding comment.

CONCLUSIONS

Out of all this come the following summary points:

1. Specification of objectives

   No operating program in communication should be undertaken
   unless the objectives are clearly and fully stated. They
   should be stated in terms of the end products desired -
   that is, not in terms of getting such-and-such content in
   the media nor even getting such-and-such content to the
   attention of a specified size of audience, but rather in
   terms of the actual effects upon the audience (or beyond
   it) at which the program is aimed. Only with such specifi-
   cations can the effectiveness of the program be evaluated.
   And such evaluation should be undertaken in terms of the
   program's impact upon the audience's attitudes, tastes,
   skills, behavior, or upon institutional changes beyond these.
   The objectives will probably have to be stated quantitatively:
   how much of what response from how many of whom. It is
   always instructive and sometimes surprising to state objec-
   tives in their full detail.

2. Differentiation of audience

Almost always it is useful to differentiate the audience and thus the program. It is not always as "impressive" that way, but it is usually more efficient. This calls for thinking through the problem of specialized channels, of different types of effects (as in the reinforcing versus the converting), of concern with particular parts of the audience (as with the opinion leaders), and of concern with the alternate activities in which the audience would be involved, i.e., which this program displaces. (In connection with this last, for example, there are instances in which people who would otherwise be reading a good book are enticed into discussion programs or watching educational television - a change of activity which is not necessarily intended or desired).

3. Concentration

Small-scale changes in availability are not likely to bring impressive effects. Thus, it would seem to be more useful to concentrate upon changing availability in relatively limited areas rather than changing availability patterns only slightly in a wide range of areas.

It goes without saying that the problem is terribly difficult and terribly complicated. In order to operate most efficiently, one needs a realistic sophistication about the whole problem. There is no single solution, and what often seems most impressive is usually not so.