

MEDIA LUDENTIA

K. E. Wilkerson
Salisbury State College

When Solon, now retired but as always mentally alert had gone to see Thespis perform, he was scandalized and he scolded the actor for having uttered so many lies before so many people. Thespis replying that it was no harm to say or do so in a play, Solon vehemently struck his staff against the ground: "Ah," said he, "if we honor and commend such play as this, we shall find it some day in our business."

Plutarch, *Solon* 29

Modern echoes of the attitudes said to have been expressed by Solon and Thespis toward the fictions of theatre are to be found in the writings of William Stephenson and Erik Barnouw on the content of mass media communication. In *The Play Theory of Mass Communication*, Stephenson (1967) postulates:

The mass media, in much that pertains to social control as well as convergent selectivity...do not communicate truth or reality but only a semblance of it--of a fictional, representational, or charismatic character. Reaching the truth is a matter for science, technology, reason, and *work*. Charisma, imagery, and fiction are characteristic of

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convergencies.

But this is not to be despised. On the contrary, reality is so complex that its symbolical representation is essential to give it meanings that ordinary people can appreciate. Politics is conversation about freedom, democracy, liberty, fundamental rights, and the like--issues which need bear little relation to ongoing real conditions or legislative actions. But all these can be good fun, that is, good communication-pleasure. (p. 195, emphasis in original)

Thus we should believe that fictions are not harmful in a play.

To Erik Barnouw, however, fictions may be insidious forces with great potential to alter our lives precisely because they have found their way into our business. They may function as effective propaganda for ideologies--consumerism, for example--supportive of the interests of big business which exercises effective control over mass media communication throughout much of the world. Barnouw (1978) has said: "'Entertainment' programs--plays, cartoons, game shows, variety shows--can be...effective propaganda precisely because they are received as something else--'entertainment'" (p. 102). He thinks the concept of entertainment has changed: "In previous centuries 'entertainment' was a once-in-a-while thing. Someone might real aloud, or play a musical instrument; for the fortunate there might be an occasional trip to the theatre. Today's television has no relation to those occasional *divertissements*. It is not surcease from daily routine, it *is* daily routine. It is an environmental presence" (p. 102, Barnouw's emphasis). In other words, we must be very careful about what sorts of thing we call play. I will return to Barnouw's critique of television content after looking more fully at Stephenson's theory.

I

Stephenson's play theory of mass communication is more precisely a theory of mass audiences. He is

particularly concerned to develop methodologies which will yield information about the attitudes people do in fact have which are created or influenced by media content. Most of the advantages he claims for his theory over other sociological theories of mass communication result from his elaboration of Q methodology, a set of sampling techniques which he claims will produce objective data about subjective states of viewers. Most of the earlier empirical research devoted to mass communication had used, he says, the language of information theory which is inherently inapplicable to the study of subjective phenomena. Q methodology is a statistical procedure and is not, of course, limited to use with mass audiences. I have no objections to Q methodology used to measure public opinion and attitudes, although I am not convinced that, as employed by Stephenson, it measures all he claims for it. He is convincing in arguing both that the subject's intrapersonal communication system is basic to such measurement and that Q methodology is an appropriate tool with which to undertake it: "Q-method solves some perplexing...problems in the measurement of public opinion and offers political science a primary tool for sampling political opinion to determine what opinions exist in the first place before attempts are made to count their incidence in the public" (Stephenson, 1967: 8).

No formal link between the methodological (pragmatic) component of Stephenson's theory is made with those features of the theory having to do specifically with play; there is, however, a significant conceptual link. As I understand his theory the distinction between *social control* and *convergent selectivity* is crucial in establishing the need for consideration of play to inform the study of mass media communication (1967: 192). To get at this distinction it is necessary to notice some features of Stephenson's concept of subjectivity: it is, he says, the process of the self experiencing the world "from within" (1967: 10). Among its contents one finds "attitude[s] of mind about...matter[s]" and feelings, opinions, thinking, fantasy, etc. He tends to identify subjectivity with the "intrapersonal level" or

"system" of communication (1967: 6, 12). The contents of subjectivity appear to lie at two fairly distinct levels: the deeper level contains "beliefs, needs, and values." At the higher level ("higher" should connote no sense of "greater than," "superior to," etc.) one finds "wants, images, and social character" (1967: 8). Stephenson distinguishes further between these levels in terms of their relations to conduct: "Beliefs, needs, and values involve early internalizations and ego structures of people, and all have moral undertones. Wants, images, and social character are related more to the self, and to immediate social conditions, and are without the categorical imperatives of beliefs. *A person is rarely aware of his social character and does not rule his conduct by it. He does so in terms of his ethical and other beliefs*" (1967: 8, emphasis added). Q method permits individuals to model their subjectivity at either level (1967: 61). Although Stephenson acknowledges "contradictions" in his schematic separation of these levels and their related principles, *social control* and *convergent selectivity*, it is evident that he values their separation for purposes of inquiry. Communication that exerts social control is directed toward the deeper level of subjectivity which "is maintained and reinforced by social communication of every kind (familial, educational, religious, economic, political)" (1967: 44). Convergent selectivity, whose object is "to let each person choose something different for himself" (1967: 2), is characteristic of communication directed to the higher level of subjectivity. This level is "active" when the individual is involved in subjective play. Significantly it is toward this level that mass media communications are directed and ordinarily, according to Stephenson, the individual's participation in such communication is pleasurable (1967: 195).

One significant positive effect modern mass media have generated in American culture, according to Stephenson, is the shaping of social character in the form of the other-directed person described by David Riesman. Stephenson writes that "other-direction is a type of social character which apparently supports

the 'new middle class' in the United States.... The new American is characterized by 'variability, sensitivity to others, the taking of goals from peers and mass media, and concern for consumption'" (1967: 81). It is important to keep in view the separation of social character from the deeper belief system of the individual. Mass media ordinarily impact only upon the higher level construct. The main social benefit that derives from their influence is improved "sociability," mainly improved interpersonal communication or, simply, conversation which Stephenson believes is mostly playful and therefore pleasurable (1967: 89).

We can now see why *The Play Theory of Mass Communication* views its subject with a more approving attitude than do those studies of media infused with historical and ethical concerns. By placing man's belief system effectively beyond the reach of media they are rendered relatively innocuous. Because they do influence the higher levels of subjectivity they provide us with communication pleasure which, incidentally, explains why the "new American" in particular is such a consumer of media. And the theory's connection with play is apparent.

The concept of play which informs Stephenson's theory is derived mainly from writings by the early twentieth century Dutch scholar, Johan Huizinga. Huizinga's book, *Homo Ludens*, inaugurated what Jacques Ehrmann (1968) has termed "an anthropology of play" (p. 31). It was the first systematic attempt to establish that there are deep relationships between apparently unplayful human activities such as law, war, and religion, which nevertheless inhere in what Huizinga (1950) calls the play element of culture (pp. 18, 19, 149-151). Stephenson also makes use of Roger Caillois' (1961) typology of play in his discussion of play theory. But Caillois' work grew out of Huizinga's of which he says, "It is... capable of opening extremely fruitful avenues to research and reflection" (p. 37). Stephenson is confident that he has opened and is traveling down one of those avenues. In the remainder of this paper I will concentrate on the play concept of Stephenson's theory, first, attempting a critique of his extrapo-

lation of the concept, and, second, contrasting the attitude toward current media practices and their public consequences it assumes with that expressed in more traditional critical terms by Erik Barnouw.

II

One requirement of an adequate theory even in the social sciences is that its terms be clearly defined; another is that the terms should accurately map onto the territory they are designed to comprehend; still another is that the territory not be arbitrarily bounded unless its boundaries are clearly related to limitations of objectives (e.g., one might study speech sounds as acoustical phenomena and impose theoretical boundaries which preclude consideration of ways these participate in language). These are surely minimal requirements which should be met before any consideration is given to the explanatory and predictive powers of the theory.

Huizinga does not provide a concise definition of play. He devotes instead a full chapter to the explication of the concept (Huizinga, 1950: 1-27). Jacques Ehrmann (1968), who has closely read *Homo Ludens*, offers the following as a synopsis of Huizinga's definitive remarks: Play is

a free activity, experienced as "make-believe" and situated outside of everyday life...capable of totally absorbing the player; an activity entirely lacking in material interest and in utility. It transpires in an explicitly circumscribed time and space, is carried out in an orderly fashion according to given rules, and gives rise to group relationships which often surround themselves with mystery or emphasize through disguises their difference from the ordinary world. (Ehrmann, 1968: 34)

Ehrmann notices the dialectical nature of this definition and its inherent lack of clarity: it makes no convincing distinction between play and seriousness, between gratuitousness and usefulness, play and work,

play and everyday life, etc. (1968: 32). Yet it is essentially this definition which Stephenson adopts as the basis for his play theory of mass communication. The similarities between Huizinga's and Stephenson's definitions are apparent: "Playing is *pretending*," Stephenson writes,

a stepping outside the world of duty and responsibility. Play is an *interlude* in the day. It is not ordinary or real. It is *voluntary* and not a task or moral duty. It is...*disinterested*, providing a temporary satisfaction. Though attended to with seriousness, it is not really important Play is enjoyed, no matter who wins. Play is *secluded*, taking place in a particular place set off for the purpose in time or space: it has a beginning and an end.... Play is a free activity; yet it absorbs the player completely. The player is unself-conscious if he plays with proper enjoyment. (Stephenson, 1967: 46)

Stephenson's definition makes clear his concern with audiences, the consumers of media, and his unconcern with media themselves. He observes that the daily "fill" of media is playful but he does not mean to suggest that publishing a newspaper or programming a television channel is done in the spirit of play. I will return to this point.

In his Foreword to *Homo Ludens*, Huizinga is mindful of the ages-old appeal of the notion that all human activity is play. He is careful to avoid such a wholesale reduction of so complex an array of factors; careful to the point, as we shall see, of excluding from consideration actions ordinarily taken to be playful. Unfortunately he does not directly address the subject of mass communication, but in his final chapter on contemporary play he denigrates every instance of mass culture on which he remarks. In one instance he comments on a kind of activity which provides much of the daily fill of American mass media, "the organized sports of American universities": together with international contests, these have failed to make sport productive of culture be-

cause such events are undertaken and received with a "fatal" degree of seriousness (Huizinga, 1950: 198). Thus even sports may be excluded from what Huizinga considers to be play. Stephenson's remarks on team sports are confusing. He says that the British "would never cry" if their team lost but that Americans do cry over such (Stephenson, 1967: 46). Since he had said in defining play that although "attended to with seriousness, it is not really important," he seems to mean that team sports in Britain are playful but they may not be in America. I conclude from other of his remarks that he means such sports provide entertainment (communication pleasure) for mass audiences who, in reading or viewing them, experience play. Yet it seems Stephenson would have to agree that a spectator may view a contest with such seriousness that his activity could not be considered playful. At what point then does his response become too serious? When he berates an umpire? When he smashes his television set?

Huizinga explicitly warns that attempts to evaluate the play element in modern life will result in contradictory conclusions (1950: 199). As play content decreases in the arenas of organized sports and games there is, he thinks, a corresponding increase in play within business itself and particularly within the "great business concerns," primarily because of advances in telecommunications (1950: 200). But here he is looking only at the encouragement given to increasing commercial competition mainly by technological advances "which have made intercourse of every sort so...easy for mankind as a whole" (1950: 200). This observation is far removed from Stephenson's notion of communication pleasure and does not view communication itself as evincing the play element. I have emphasized differences in attitude between these writers because Stephenson's definition of play is based upon that of Huizinga; but, whereas Huizinga is mindful of problems inherent in mass culture which lead to contradictory assessments of play, Stephenson tends to ignore aspects of mass communication which could make his definition of play inapplicable to mass audiences. In searching for the play

element within contemporary civilization Huizinga finds what he terms "false play" which consists of "play-forms...used consciously or unconsciously to cover up some social or political design." And, in addition, he sees phenomena that are play in appearance only which he relates to the quality of "puerlism," a "blend of adolescence and barbarity which [is] rampant all over the world." To him it is as if "the mentality and conduct of the adolescent now reigned supreme over large areas of civilized life" (1950: 205). The main adolescent trait he identifies is "gregariousness," a trait echoed in Stephenson's concept of social character. Stephenson bases this concept on Riesman's description of the other-directed self, the main trait of which--well developed in modern adolescents--is high valuation of peer group attitudes. It is remarkable that although Huizinga and Stephenson work from similar definitions of play the former finds the adolescent quality of gregariousness to have something in common with play but presents only an illusion of it, whereas the latter finds other-direction--increased sociability--to be mainly an effect of the play element in mass communication.

Several key terms in Stephenson's definition are problematic. What, for example, does the television viewer do that constitutes pretending? Does Stephenson mean to say that the viewer pretends to accept fictive material as being true of the world? There have been many instances in which audiences have mistaken fiction for fact and have acted upon their misidentifications, but their actions were earnest rather than playful. Huizinga clearly thinks of pretending as a creative activity for the player as indicated by his example of the child pretending that a row of chairs he has arranged is a train (1950: 8). If the content of a medium happens to be true of the world Stephenson still wants it to be considered as a vehicle for subjective play by the consumer. He writes that newspaper reading has all the characteristics of play, but in reviewing these he does not directly mention pretending (1967: 150). He does say that the reader "projects himself into

the news," but I see no reason, since he gives none, to think this is characteristically done by readers although I may have done so on occasion. Without evidence to the contrary there is no cause to believe that such "pretense" is more descriptive of mass audiences than is, for example, passive, uncritical acceptance as factual the daily front page fill.

That play is an interlude and occurs in a special place Huizinga and Stephenson agree. But can these notions apply to the consumption of mass media in any definitive sense? Barnouw (1978) has said of television that it is not something apart from daily routine but is routine (1978: 2). I know of no better account of the environmental character of broadcast information than that contained in Michael Arlen's (1979) skit, "Good Morning." In it a family is busily readying for the day against a mixed backdrop of the "Today Show," "The Flintstones," and the "CBS Morning News." They pay only the scantest attention to any of it although the news includes bombings in Cambodia and features an interview with Charles Colson. At the end the mother explains to a friend who has telephoned, "We were just listening to the morning news" (1979: 3-8).

It is possible to agree with Stephenson that in much of the world mass media consumption is voluntary, in some sense disinterested, and that much of it is pleasurable. But is there anything in this set of predicates that is peculiar to play? The same could be said of eating when one is not hungry or taking a nap in the afternoon.

I think I have shown both that the definition of play in Stephenson's theory is not clear and that it does not apply in a precise way to the communication phenomena that it is supposed to comprehend. Related to these considerations is the question of scope, i.e., the range of application the theory is expected to have. The relationship is a close one because the theory's boundaries ought at least be implied by the definitions of its key terms. Stephenson's play theory, as I have pointed out, can be most readily applied to mass audiences; whether he intends it to apply directly to media is not altogether clear.

Adapting a term from Herbert Hyman, Stephenson writes of the daily "fill" of mass media. He says that although mass media have an informational function it is a far lesser one than their "almost full-time function" to entertain their audiences. But he goes on to say that this entertainment is "ego-involving" and is "at its best...a highly developed form of subjective play" (Stephenson, 1967: 50). I think he means that the fill is experienced as subjective play, hence we have returned to consideration of media effects. Stephenson gives scant attention to the content of media and none to the process of creating and publishing--in some way making available to the public--the entertaining packets which constitute the daily fill. It appears then that his theory is a de facto theory of mass audiences.

Stephenson's preoccupation with subjectivity has narrowed his vision to the point that what must be considered as a complex process, i.e., communication itself, is seen as mere subjective experience. In an extension of his play theory to the modern "institution" of advertising, he defines communication "as feeling with self reference" (Stephenson, 1979: 641). Perhaps "social communication" is exempted from this solipsistic definition, but his references to the concept fail to make this clear. True to his larger theory, Stephenson writes of advertising as something experienced; its relation to play theory is through the notion of pretending: the consumer pretends he is lover, champion, adventurer, etc. Advertising he declares to be harmless; and the active communicator, the advertising specialist, who disdains truth, mangles logic, and profanes the loftiest emotions, is presumably considered worthy of praise because he makes such pretense possible. When he describes his own contributions to advertising, as in providing the name "Lark" for the Studebaker Corporation (1979: 644), Stephenson suggests these were achieved through quite unplayful, problem-solving techniques. This is further indication that play theory is restricted to media consumers; it could not apply to the serious business at the other end.

Is it reasonable to study the effects of a process

isolated from the process itself if it is known that those effects were intended and designed into the process? If we do we may conclude that mass communication is to a considerable extent a manifestation of the play element in culture although we cannot specify a scientific theory of it. But if we look at the process and at the individuals and forces which control it we will have to think otherwise. The business of mass communication in no way falls under the definition of play which Stephenson has adapted from Huizinga's. We need only consider the criterion that play is disinterested, that it seeks no end beyond that of playing itself. Not only are the executives who direct mass media businesses among the big profit-makers of the corporate world, they serve that world as its major spokesmen. To ignore these facts would be to become like the rats of Hameln, charmed by the piper but unmindful of his intentions and heedless of their own destination.

III

What advantage can we expect to gain from the adoption of Stephenson's theory? Possibly, through its link with Q method, a better understanding of audience attitudes can be obtained together with some insight into the ways these attitudes are subjectively formed. But his theory is not a breakthrough in our understanding of the impact of mass communication upon society; it tells us nothing we did not already know. Because he denigrates certain other approaches to the study of mass communication, adoption of his theory could discourage what has been a productive line of inquiry, viz, criticism informed by history and ethics.

In his recent book, *The Sponsor*, Erik Barnouw does not write as a scientist. But in his informed look at this "modern potentate" (*Notes on a Modern Potentate* is the subtitle of *The Sponsor*) he develops convincing arguments for viewing one mass medium, television, with alarm. He sees nothing playful about the business of television, although he uses the image of a game in discussing it. "Entertainment,"

he implies, is a euphemism for programs which carry significant social and political messages serving to encourage consumption of largely unnecessary goods, to influence attitudes toward social change, toward capitalism, etc. The euphemism tends to dull critical faculties (Barnouw, 1978: 101). He supports his claim by analyzing programs against the background of their sponsoring agencies and social conditions with which those agencies are deeply involved.

I believe we can learn from writers like Barnouw, Wilbur Schramm, and Michael Arlen. Certainly writing such as theirs ought not be dismissed from serious consideration because it is not grounded in behavioral theory. The state of our knowledge of mass communication is far too poor to support a general, comprehensive theory of it, if by theory we mean a construct having scientific rigor. There can still be valuable study of media and their audiences. In some limited areas, primarily technological, theory construction is well advanced, and a grand array of studies--philosophical, critical, descriptive, etc.--are being done. I regret that there has been no Huizinga to examine mass media communication in the television era as it relates to the play element of culture. The work of such a one would, I think, be quite different from Stephenson's.

Kenneth E. Wilkerson, Communication Arts, Salisbury State College, Salisbury, MD 21801

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COMMENT BY WILLIAM STEPHENSON

As one writes these lines, it is fifteen years since *The Play Theory of Mass Communication* was published (1967), and Professor Wilkerson's paper affords an opportunity to ask why it is still ignored in communication theory and research. Twenty years ago I was surprised to find that communication theorists, making an ideal of objectivity, overlooked that mass communication at its best is a form of subjective play. The informational function of the mass media is an interlude, still, in the daily thrust of the media to entertain people, for whatever ulterior purposes, and even the *news* programs are in ludenic form, however biased one way or the other. The play theory sought to provide means for exploring the *play* at issue, and to explain the nature of its enjoyment. The ulterior purposes were categorized into two main areas of concern, that of *social control*, and the other *convergent selectivity*, the key into the former being *communication pain* (as loss of self) and into the latter, *communication pleasure* (as gain of self). The real problem concerned the latter concepts, of communication pain and communication pleasure, i.e., of making gain or loss of self operational. The real question, thereafter, was what did this matter?

The theory called for an abductive methodology, not the hypothetico-deductive methodology assumed by Wilkerson: For this we make no excuse, since we are in the forefront of science method, and not dragging behind the 19th century deductive methodology. The theory remains highly viable, even according to Schramm (1973), who, like Wilkerson, nevertheless misunderstood it. One has to ask, then, why it remains completely ignored, and almost completely misunderstood?

This comment can suggest three answers. We tried