

# Merchandising Commodities and Citizenship on Television

BY G. D. WIEBE

While recognizing that citizenship is not soap, this article argues that efforts to "sell" broad social objectives via radio or television are not likely to succeed unless the essential conditions for effective merchandising exist, or can be made to exist. These conditions are primarily that the audience must be forcefully motivated and clearly directed to an adequate, appropriate, and accessible social mechanism.

The author demonstrates the importance of these facets by case studies of four programs built around constructive social goals. An earlier version of this paper was delivered before the American Psychological Association in September, 1951.

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THE effectiveness of radio, and more recently of television, as advertising media requires no documentation beyond noting that American businessmen have invested hundreds of millions of dollars in radio and television advertising. Social scientists, seeing this enormous and successful motivational phenomenon, ask why these media cannot work with comparable effectiveness in molding behavior and habit patterns in such areas as citizenship responsibility and community participation. To some extent, radio and television have been, and continue to be, effective in these areas. But in these frightening times, the question persists: Why can't you sell brotherhood and rational thinking like you sell soap? If the query is usually stated with less bluntness, it nevertheless poses the same essential question.

We can agree, to begin with, that the answer certainly will not be simply that radio and television can or cannot function in social areas as well as they can in motivating people to buy commodities. The answer will be complex. First of all, we may delimit our problem substantially by noting that the seller of commodities is basically interested in getting as many people as possible to engage in a specified unit of overt behavior. This overt behavior is, with few exceptions, the purchase of his product. The social scientist often disavows the achievement of specified behavior as an objective. In such instances, there is no longer a basis for comparison.

This paper is addressed to such persons as the one who said: "Look

here, you claim, and I believe your claim, that radio and television have caused hundreds of thousands of people to alter certain personal habits and to spend hundreds of thousands of dollars a year to buy the particular commodity involved in this change of habit. Now think what radio and television could do about juvenile delinquency, and many comparable problems, if they could release a similar flow of energy and money in these important areas." Why, he asks, can't radio and television "sell" the reduction of juvenile delinquency like they have sold the use of the home permanent wave? Our answer is that perhaps radio and television can help to achieve social and cultural objectives, given certain conditions. These conditions can most appropriately be studied where they are known to exist; that is, in the merchandising of commodities.

#### MINIMUM CONDITIONS FOR SELLING COMMODITIES

The seller of a commodity, whether it be a home permanent or an automobile, assures himself that certain agencies, mechanisms, and conditions exist and are in good working order before he advertises his product. Consider a few of these: He assures himself that the commodity is being produced or manufactured. He assures himself that a smooth distribution system is available. He assures himself that retail outlets exist, and will handle his product. He assures himself that the immediate setting in which the buyer obtains the product is attractive, available, and convenient.

Now, cultural objectives cannot be purchased "at your nearest drug or department store." But nevertheless, there is a fruitful observation to be made here. Note especially the retail outlet as a social mechanism. The advertiser sets up, or affiliates with, a social mechanism in which the behavior motivated by his advertising may be consummated with a minimum expenditure of energy. Then he advertises. The function of radio and television advertising in selling commodities may now be seen in proper perspective. Radio and television advertising perform one basic function. They motivate the potential customer to traverse those last few steps that separate him from the social mechanism in which he can complete his behavioral intention.

Advertising does not move people to unilateral action. It moves them into interaction with social mechanisms. The emphasis on the phrase "social mechanism," rather than on the people who operate

these mechanisms, perhaps carries some connotation of a clanking robot. But the phrase is used advisedly because the people who operate them engage in highly specialized role behavior which is characteristic of the mechanism. I speak primarily of retail sales people. Their behavior is highly structured to conform with the purpose of the social mechanism in which they work. The function of that mechanism is to facilitate the actual purchase of commodities.

It is the crucial importance of the retail store, viewed as a social mechanism which facilitates the desired behavior, that social scientists often seem to overlook when they yearn for behavioral changes comparable to those achieved by advertisers.

Having considered some of the conditions that characterize the advertising and sale of commodities, we may now attempt to generalize our finding in the form of a principle which may be of use to social scientists. Until it has been much more extensively examined and tested, it must, of course, be submitted as an hypothesis.

The success of mass persuasion, in terms of motivating behavior, is a function of the audience member's experience with regard to five factors:

1. the force
2. the direction
3. the mechanism
4. the adequacy and compatibility
5. the distance

A word of explanation regarding each of these five factors seems appropriate. The *force* of the motivation refers to the experience of the audience member which is only partially determined by the content of the radio or television communication. The force of the motivation is a combination of one's predisposition toward the goal prior to the radio or television program *and* the motivation provided by the communication.

The *direction* of motivated persons to the mechanism consists of telling audience members specifically where or how they may easily consummate their motivation in interaction with a social mechanism. The third factor refers simply to the existence of an *implementing social mechanism*. The *adequacy* and *compatibility* of the mechanism refers to whether the mechanism can, and whether it is inclined, to

facilitate the goal behavior. The *distance* of the audience member from the mechanism might be rephrased as the audience member's subjective estimate of the intervening energy expenditure required, in comparison with the reward. Distance is used in its common meaning, but it also includes the counteracting, impeding and inhibitory factors that tend to keep the motivated person from achieving the goal of his motivation.

I wish now to discuss four programs, each of which was built around a constructive social objective, each of which had as its stated or clearly implied purpose the motivation of specific overt behavior. The relative success of these programs will be considered in terms of the five factors stated above. No attempt will be made to quantify the degree to which various factors are present. We will proceed in terms of estimates as to whether various factors appear to be relatively strong or weak.

#### THE CBS-KATE SMITH BOND SELLING CAMPAIGN

Most of you are familiar with the Bond Selling Campaign conducted by Kate Smith over the CBS Network on September 21, 1943. This spectacular event has been studied and reported in book form by Robert K. Merton.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps we can add a bit to the wealth of information contained in that book by considering Kate Smith's bond selling campaign from the point of view of our present discussion. All the elements of good merchandising appear to have been present and in good order.

The force of the motivation appears to have been strong. In 1943, audience members were strongly predisposed to take tangible, specific part in helping their men in the armed forces. But the task of demonstrating the one-to-one relationship between civilian activities and winning the war was a chronic and perplexing problem to public information officials. Our economy is so complex and ultimate consequences are so far removed from initial causes that those who stayed at home had difficulty in finding a feeling of adequate partnership with their men in the armed forces. This difficulty was not overcome by presentation of the idea that buying bonds aided the prosecution of the war by reducing inflation. Inflation seemed remote and abstract

<sup>1</sup> *Mass Persuasion*, New York: Harper & Bros., 1946.

compared to planes and bullets. The hazard of inflation was passed over in favor of another truth; namely, that individuals felt a strong need to experience their bond buying as direct aid to their fighting men. Kate Smith appealed directly and forcefully to this existing need.

As to the direction to the mechanism, the second factor, little was left to the imagination. Miss Smith spoke, repeatedly, as follows:

“We’ve worked it out to make it the easiest thing in the world for every one of you to buy a war bond today. Every one of Columbia’s stations, including the one that you’re listening to now, has a special war bond telephone number. That’s all there is to it. Listen for the phone number, jot it down, call that number and order that bond.”

People knew exactly how to get in touch with the social mechanism.

The existence of the mechanism, the third factor, is apparent in the quotation above. At 134 CBS stations, extra telephone lines were manned by trained operators. Clerks were mobilized and trained to process the orders.

The mechanism was compatible with the motivation, the fourth requirement, for the mechanism was organized and operated exclusively to service bond buying calls. The adequacy of the mechanism was attested by the phenomenal number of calls that were handled.

The distance of the audience member from the mechanism, the fifth factor, is of special interest. Physical distance was literally reduced to the distance between the listener and his telephone. Psychological distance was also minimized. The listener remained in his own home. There were no new people to meet, no unfamiliar procedures, no forms to fill out, no explanations, no waiting (except that many people got busy signals on their telephones, and this probably had some bandwagon effect to counteract the annoyance). Inhibiting, impeding and counteracting forces were at a minimum. Perhaps the only one that was generally present was the usual reluctance to spend money. Even this was not simply an inhibitor because the appeal was for a personal sharing of deprivation. “Buy more than you can afford,” said Kate Smith. “Buy a sacrifice bond.” Thus financial sacrifice became compatible with the nature of the motivation.

We have reason, then, to expect this effort at mass motivation to be successful. It was indeed. Audience members called in their orders for

bonds at the rate of more than two million dollars an hour, for a total of 39 million dollars in 18 consecutive hours. A year later, profiting by experience but using the same basic sales techniques, Miss Smith sold the phenomenal sum of \$112,000,000 worth of War Bonds in 18½ consecutive hours.<sup>2</sup> In these instances, CBS played a multiple role. It provided the motivation and directed it to its own stations, which served as the social mechanism.

#### CIVILIAN DEFENSE MANPOWER

The Kate Smith bond selling campaigns were spectacular successes, but most social and cultural objectives cannot be achieved simply by means of telephone calls. Nor can radio or television stations usually undertake the functions of the mechanism. I should like to review, very briefly, a television campaign in which the inadequacy of the social mechanism is demonstrated.<sup>3</sup>

Station WJZ-TV was approached for assistance in mobilizing civilian defense workers. The Civilian Defense people, to whom we may refer as "CD," were in the position of client. They came to the television station to advertise their product. The management of the station arranged to broadcast a weekly series of television shows. The objective was to persuade citizens of New York City to sign up at designated CD offices for training and continuing responsibility in the local CD organization. These CD offices and their personnel and procedures are, in this instance, the mechanism.

Note that audience members were, in this case, asked to leave their homes, find an unfamiliar address, and voluntarily pledge a substantial amount of their leisure time to be spent at unspecified tasks under the tutelage of unknown persons. Granted that some persons were strongly predisposed in favor of participation in CD, this goal still called for very substantial impact from the television programs.

The series was soon discontinued. Registration facilities were so overburdened by the response that even mimeographed acknowledgments of registration, together with pleas for patience, were running many weeks behind. Teachers, facilities, training manuals, equipment—these and the general administrative provisions were all inadequate.

<sup>2</sup> Columbia Broadcasting System, Incorporated. *Annual Report For The Fiscal Year Ended December 30, 1944.*

<sup>3</sup> I am indebted to Mr. Robert Saudek of the American Broadcasting Company for the information on which this analysis is based.

Without considering each of the five factors in detail, it is apparent that the motivation had force, the direction to the mechanism was specific, the mechanism (namely, the CD organization) existed and was undoubtedly compatible with the motivation. The response is evidence that the distance of the audience member from the mechanism was overcome. But the mechanism was not adequate. While the campaign, insofar as television was concerned, was a notable success, the total campaign must be considered less than successful since hundreds of responsive citizens were, in effect, rebuffed after having responded to what they were led to believe was a dire need in an emergency.

#### AN OUTSTANDING DOCUMENTARY

If the civilian defense incident illustrates a compatible, but inadequate mechanism, a third program will illustrate the complete absence of a mechanism.

In March of 1947, CBS broadcast an hour-long documentary radio program entitled, "The Eagle's Brood." The program dealt with juvenile delinquency. The objective of the program was, directly or indirectly, to reduce the incidence of juvenile delinquency. Unless you had the memorable experience of hearing this program, I must ask you to accept, on faith, my statement that its impact was vivid and compelling. Thus we will assume that the program rated well in terms of the force of the motivation. With regard to the second factor, listeners were not directed to a mechanism.

What of the third factor? Where is the implementing mechanism? In terms of our analogy with the sale of commodities, where was the retail store? The mechanism was absent and the listener was admonished to create it. He was urged to "form a neighborhood council." "You find out," said the script, "who the leaders are in your neighborhood. Not the stuffed shirts . . . but the *real* leaders. You invite representatives of the clubs . . . the churches, the unions, the business groups. . . . You fan each other's interest. You get going." Nor was this an empty admonition. The script cited dramatic and vivid documentation of the effectiveness of neighborhood councils in reducing juvenile delinquency.

Compared with Kate Smith's "pick up the phone and buy your bond" or with the civilian defense program's "stop in and register,"

the admonition "form a neighborhood council" is certainly formidable.

Could a single radio program motivate people intensely enough so that they would, in fact, set up their own social mechanism? The psychological distance, in this instance, is almost certainly prohibitive. The inhibiting, the impeding and the counteracting forces are numerous and apparent. It is, I believe, a singular tribute to the people who produced this documentary program, that several listeners wrote in, requesting more information, and stating that they intended to try.

Many social scientists would feel that aside from the actual establishment of neighborhood councils, the success of this program should be measured in terms of attitude changes and in terms of interest engendered among listeners. By these criteria, the program was without doubt successful.<sup>4</sup> These criteria, furthermore, are especially appropriate to the purposes of the broadcast. Let us agree, for the moment, that numerous neighborhood councils with the objective of reducing delinquency could hardly be expected to spring from the single documentary broadcast, moving as it was. Why, then, was it broadcast? We may presume that it was broadcast to provide information and to establish or intensify attitudes and interests which would predispose listeners toward constructive participation if the occasion for such participation should arise; that is, if and when an adequate and compatible social mechanism should come into being.

In terms of our analogy with the sale of commodities, it is as if a manufacturer were to advertise in order to predispose potential customers in favor of buying his product if, in the future, things worked out so that retail stores stocked his product. This situation was not uncommon during the Second World War when many advertised products could not be purchased. The seller was morally certain that he would get back into production of consumer goods in the future, and that his retail outlets would be intact. Meanwhile, his objective was not to motivate buying behavior, but to maintain or to intensify attitudes.

The immediate effects of the documentary broadcast on juvenile delinquency probably compared very favorably with immediate effects derived by those wartime advertisers. In both cases, the social mecha-

<sup>4</sup>Elmo Wilson has reported some of these outcomes in "The Effectiveness of Documentary Broadcasts," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, Vol. 12, No. 1 (Spring, 1948), pp. 19-29.



nism was not functioning. In both cases, the behavior awaited the activation of facilitating mechanisms.

THE TELEVISED HEARINGS OF THE KEFAUVER  
COMMITTEE IN NEW YORK CITY

In discussing the Civilian Defense program, we found an inadequate mechanism. In discussing the documentary broadcast on juvenile delinquency, we found the mechanism to be non-existent. The recent Kefauver Committee hearings in New York City, when examined in terms of our five factors, illustrate several other defects not yet discussed.

The students in my Social Psychology class at The City College of New York raised the following question regarding the televised Kefauver hearings: To what extent will aroused citizens implement their attitudes in constructive citizenship behavior? To investigate this question, we formulated a questionnaire, and the students conducted 260 interviews among people of voting age who had seen varying amounts of the hearings on television.

I will not describe the sample beyond the general observation that it is not presented as statistically representative of New York City. It is moderately skewed toward professional and white collar people, toward the male sex and toward the 21- to 35-year-old age group. Thus the respondents might be expected to be somewhat better informed and somewhat more active generally than would a statistically representative sample. The respondents were from 12 different election districts of the city. Our interviews were conducted between 6 and 9 weeks after the close of the New York hearings.

The respondents answered this item: "The Kefauver hearings were about six weeks ago. As you think back to that time, how did you feel about the conditions that were brought to light?" Fifty-one per cent of the respondents indicated strong feelings in their responses. For example: "A shame, a disgrace." "It's deplorable and the voters are at fault." "I was shocked to think of politicians mixing up with racketeers." When people, after an interval of approximately two months, remember and articulate feelings of shock, protest or anger, we may safely assume that the telecasts were experienced by them as forceful motivation. Hereafter, when we refer to "the sample," we will be referring only to these 134 "most affected" respondents.

The closed hearings of the Kefauver Committee were conducted primarily to gather information as a basis for corrective legislation by Congress. However, from statements made by Mr. Rudolf Halley, Chief Counsel, before the American Television Society, there is no doubt that the televising of the hearings was intended, if not primarily then at least secondarily, to arouse citizens, and to stimulate them to set their house in order. Editors and columnists joined in the stated or implied belief that the televised hearings would go far in reducing apathy among citizens. In the hearings themselves, however, audience members were not told specifically what to do. They were not directed to a mechanism. So, regarding our first two factors, we may say that motivation appears to have been forceful, but the direction of motivated persons to a mechanism was absent.

What of the third factor, an implementing social mechanism? Does one exist? Certainly it does. The political party organizations are such mechanisms. Their representative structure reaches from the individual party member, via representative levels, to the leaders of municipal government. The party in power is directly answerable to the citizen for the calibre of municipal government, and the party out of power traditionally exercises its right to criticize the shortcomings of the incumbents. Both major political party structures, then, are appropriate existing mechanisms for the processing and implementing of individual protests. Fifty-two per cent of our sample enjoyed formal membership in these mechanisms; that is, 52 per cent were enrolled party members.

What of the adequacy of the mechanism? There is probably no mechanism in New York City that is as adequate for representing and implementing rank and file motivation as is the mechanism of political party structure. At its base is a veritable army of committee men, approximately one for each 150 persons of voting age. From this broad base, the representative hierarchy rises through Election District Captains and Assembly District Leaders to the top echelons of officials. The mechanism is, at least theoretically, adequate.

Is the mechanism compatible with the motivation? Is it responsive? Certainly it cannot be compatible unless it is available. Are the committee men available to individuals? The respondents were asked the following question:

"Now I'm not asking you for anybody's name, but I would like to know whether you know your committeeman—just whether you know him or not."

Those familiar with the problems of phrasing questionnaire items will probably agree that this item may tend to invite "yes" answers. At any rate, 25 per cent answered "Yes," while 51 per cent said "No"; and 24 per cent responded, "What's a committeeman?"

These percentages represent all the respondents whether they were enrolled party members or not. When enrolled party members are taken as the base, the percentages on the same item are "Yes," 39 per cent; "No," 46 per cent; and "What's a committeeman?", 15 per cent. From these figures we can only conclude that though the mechanism exists, and though it is theoretically adequate, it leaves much to be desired insofar as availability and compatibility are concerned.

But in spite of its limitations, 52 per cent of our respondents *belong* to the mechanism, and 25 per cent know their entrée to it through their committeemen. What, then, did our respondents do? To what did their motivation lead them? In gathering this information, students probed for the role or position of persons with whom the respondent interacted. Thus our information can be subdivided by the deference direction involved, with the following results:

6 per cent in spite of probing, maintained that they had done absolutely nothing. They hadn't even talked to anyone about the hearings.

7 per cent had written to their congressmen in Washington.

3 per cent had discussed the hearings with persons below them in deference level—for example, their children.

78 per cent had discussed the hearings with individuals on a lateral deference level—for example, with friends, spouse, or with colleagues on the job.

6 per cent had discussed the hearings with persons above them in deference level.

It is among this last 6 per cent that we must look for those who registered their feelings with a social mechanism. Here is what these people, eight in number, had done:

2 discussed the hearings with their employers.

1 protested to the City Health Department over lax enforcement.

1 talked to "a judge, a colonel and a playground supervisor."

1 prayed for the souls of the racketeers.

2 discussed the hearings with people active in politics.

1 discussed the hearings with "committeemen and women of my party."

Only this last single individual reported that he went consciously and deliberately to the social mechanism which is, on the one hand, directly responsible to the citizen, and on the other hand, directly responsible for municipal government. This, I submit, is a remarkable finding when one considers two factors: first, that the scandal, bribery and corruption in municipal government exposed by the televised hearings had such impact on the people of New York as to seriously disrupt the normal flow of life in that city; and second, that the recently elected incumbent mayor and his high officials declared their independence of these sinister forces and so, presumably, would be sympathetic to an orderly demand for reform via the party hierarchy.

To what extent do these findings indicate an incompatible mechanism? To what extent do these findings have their roots in psychological distance as experienced by audience members? We cannot answer these questions from present data. Almost certainly both conditions are involved. If a mechanism were incompatible, this fact would probably be experienced by the audience member as increased psychological distance. But given a compatible mechanism, psychological or physical distance might still be great through no fault of the mechanism *per se*.

Let us consider only one bit of evidence relating to the fifth factor, the distance of the audience member from the mechanism. Respondents were asked:

"Do you think the Kefauver hearings will improve conditions in the long run, or do you think that things will settle down and be about the same as they were before?"

If audience members were skeptical about the worth of the campaign, this feeling would operate in direct counteraction to the force of the motivation. It would increase the psychological distance of the audience member from the mechanism—as if a person would say, "It was wonderful, it shocked me out of my lethargy, but it won't do any good. You can't change these things."

Will the hearings improve conditions? The responses fall into five categories:

Improve	27 per cent
Maybe improve	25
About the same	37
Get worse	1
Don't know	10

Varying amounts of skepticism are shown in 73 per cent of the responses. Even in terms of this single observation, we may conclude that the psychological distance, in the case of the Kefauver hearings, was substantial.

By way of summary, we may conclude that the televised Kefauver hearings exhibited several defects when examined as telecasts intended to motivate behavior. First, motivated audience members were not directed to a social mechanism. Secondly, the mechanism does not appear to have been compatible with the motivation. Thirdly, the distance, in terms of inhibiting, impeding and counteracting forces, between the audience member and the mechanism appears to have been formidable.

#### CONCLUSIONS

We may now return to our original question. Can radio and television sell social objectives as they sell soap? On the basis of our discussion we can hazard the following answer: Given a reasonable amount of receptivity among audience members, radio or television programs can produce forceful motivation. The sponsor of the social objective must tell us to what social mechanism the motivation is to be directed. He must see to the existence, adequacy and compatibility of the mechanism and he must consider the distance of audience members from this mechanism in formulating his expectations of results. To the extent that he finds these factors in good order, he is in a situation comparable to that of a commercial sponsor, and he can reasonably expect results comparable with those of a commercial sponsor.

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