

THE MARKLE FOUNDATION: 1975

Reprinted from the 1974/75 Annual Report
of The John & Mary R. Markle Foundation

by Lloyd N. Morrisett, President

THE MARKLE FOUNDATION: 1975

John Markle believed that a man who has funds beyond those needed for living expenses becomes "a trustee for his fellowmen and should so use those funds." Acting on this belief in 1927 John Markle established the foundation with the very broad purposes of promoting "the advancement and diffusion of knowledge among the people of the United States," and promoting "the general good of mankind." In providing for these broad purposes for his foundation, John Markle pursued a philosophy adopted by other men of great wealth of his time—notably Andrew Carnegie and John D. Rockefeller. This philosophy was that no man could foresee future conditions and needs. The foundation was an invention to provide unencumbered funds to meet future needs of mankind, but the needs to which those funds would be devoted were to be determined by the directors of the foundation.

Early in the history of the Markle Foundation a pattern of concentration was established that remains as a guiding principle of operation. The directors believed that the relatively limited funds available should be concentrated within a chosen field of activity in order to achieve the most beneficial results. This concentration of effort would not only tend to maximize the impact of the funds within the area, but would allow the staff and directors of the foundation opportunity to build up knowledge and judgment about the area to be supported. The first period of foundation operations was devoted to social welfare and lasted from 1927 until some years after John Markle's death in 1933. In 1939 the foundation began concentrating its grants on research

projects in the medical sciences. Between 1947 and 1969 the major program of the foundation was assistance for physicians in academic medicine—The Markle Scholars. In 1969 the Markle Foundation discontinued this long-standing program and began an entirely new program in mass communications. Mass communications thus became the fourth area in which the foundation had concentrated its activities since its founding in 1927.

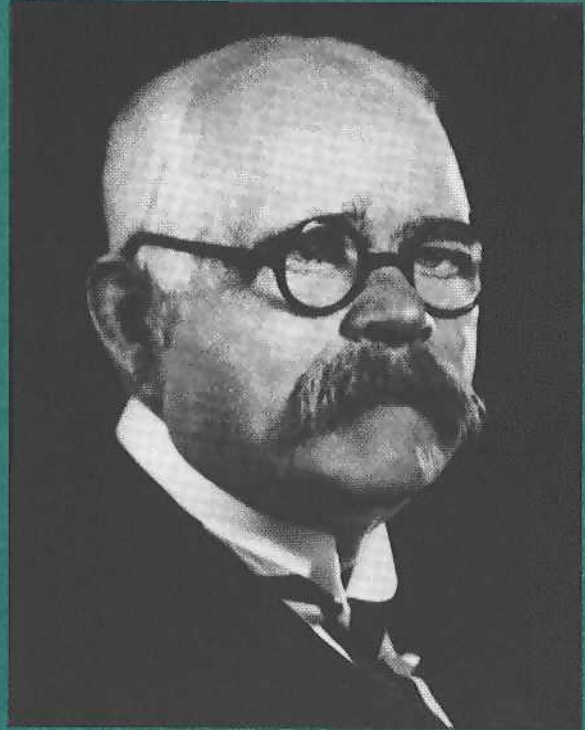
CHOOSING A NEW PROGRAM

Between 1947 and 1969 academic medicine changed as did the financing of medical education and care. These changes raised questions about the premises of the Markle Scholar program and suggested the potential desirability of a new program for the foundation, without in any way indicating what a new program should be. How do the directors of a foundation choose a new field of concentration? The nature of the Markle Foundation and the philanthropic environment provided some criteria for narrowing the range of choice. The Markle Foundation with assets in 1969 of some 40 million dollars was, and is, a relatively small foundation as compared to such giants as the Ford Foundation, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and Rockefeller Foundation. It was necessary to choose an area where these relatively modest funds might have an impact. Many foundations concentrate on education or medical care, and rather than joining in those efforts the directors asked if some less developed field might not benefit from the activities of the Markle Foundation. Finally, the Markle Foundation happened to be located in New York. Was it possible to in some way take advantage of that location? These concerns helped to narrow the choices for a new direction for the foundation program, but they did not determine it. Mass communications was only one of several possibilities, but more than any of the others, it kindled the interest and enthusiasm of the directors and staff.

Foundations are like all other institutions in that they depend on people—the continuous work and devotion of their directors and staffs for successful programs. Many areas of life would benefit from the intellectual stimulus and financial input that can be provided by intelligent foundation support. Social welfare, religion, medicine and education have traditionally been the main beneficiaries of foundation activity, but the arts and sciences, humanities, communications and almost every facet of human endeavor offer significant opportunity for foundation action. With so many worthwhile activities to choose from, the enthusiastic interest of foundation directors and staff is often the key element in the choice. This is entirely appropriate as sustained interest and enthusiasm must be added to knowledge and judgment if the foundation is to do its best work.

THE PERVASIVE INFLUENCE OF MASS COMMUNICATIONS

Despite all the current attention to television, many of us are only vaguely aware of the pervasive influence that mass communications, the media, have on our lives. Television, radio, newspapers, magazines, books and film provide structure for daily life—habitual periods for reading the newspaper, watching the evening news, saving time for a favorite program, going to a new movie, reading a book, planning next summer's fling at tennis while reading a tennis magazine in the winter. We plan our days using the information from mass communications and around mass communications themselves as reliable and desired events. In all these ways and many more, the media provide continuity in a lifelong process of cultural socialization and education. The young child begins to learn about the world outside the boundaries of his home from the image presented on television. After completing formal education, our further education in public affairs, economics, and almost everything out-



side immediate personal experience, is dependent on mass communications. Our books and films and television programs also portray, sometimes in simplified and caricatured form, significant values, myths, and traditions of our culture. The media are a cultural mirror in which we see reflections of ourselves and are entertained, educated, and occasionally enlightened.

Despite their pervasive importance, mass communications have never received the self-conscious attention from society that other great socializing institutions have had and continue to receive. The church, the home, and the school all receive explicit attention as cultural institutions of key importance. Mass communications while attaining similar importance are not treated in the same way.

The comparative inattention to the media by society and by foundations stems from many causes. The potpourri of things included in "mass communications" is apparently more diverse than what is normally encompassed in the concept of "education" for example. Mass communications are also a Johnny-come-lately as an important social institution compared to the school, church or family. Mass communications are, in addition, in a state of rapid evolution—an evolution with dynamics that are quite different from the dynamics of change in education or health.

DISTINGUISHING FEATURES OF MASS COMMUNICATIONS

The evolution of mass communications is characterized among other things by the primacy of technology, the dominance of private enterprise, important federal and sometimes state and local initiative and by the relative absence of non-profit, non-governmental, public interest components. Technological change has been the creative and driving force behind evolution in mass communications. The print-

ing press, the radio, television, 8 millimeter film, super 8, and digital computers have all brought about changes in mass communications. Inventions now on the drawing boards and those yet to be dreamed of will continue the process of change. In this, mass communications are very different from education or health care in which technology has generally played a lesser part.

Mass communications differ from more familiar fields of philanthropic work in that they are overwhelmingly dominated by private enterprise. Television, radio, newspaper publishing and the rest have been influenced by governmental policy, but their flowering has depended on private for-profit enterprise. In stark contrast, education is very largely a public enterprise and overwhelmingly a non-profit venture. Health care is both public and private, but it is primarily non-profit. Mass communications are alone among the great socializing, educational and moral forces in society in being based on commercial, profit-making, privately owned ventures.

A corollary of this is the relative absence of non-profit, public interest activity within mass communications. The foundation working in education or medicine has an enormous number of general and special purpose organizations with which it can deal and to which it can make grants. In mass communications there are fewer such organizations. Enterprises in the private sector are competitive, and there is little room for cooperation in the public interest—whether there is less necessity for cooperation is an open question. While it may be difficult for the State University of New York to work cooperatively with the City University of New York in arranging joint programs and sharing in the work of cooperatively supported institutions, it is almost impossible for CBS and NBC to do so. In the one case established bureaucracy and pride stand

in the way. In the case of the networks, the Justice Department stands ready to prevent collusive activity.

The relation of government to mass communications is unique. On the one hand the First Amendment to the Constitution sets a principle of non-interference. The First Amendment states that "Congress shall make no law . . . abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press . . ." On the other hand the Communications Act of 1934 created a Federal Communications Commission with broad powers to regulate radio and, later, television. The tension between the prohibition of government activity in the First Amendment and the necessity for government activity created by the problems of allocating radio frequencies for private use continues to cause problems and ambiguities in the relation of government to electronic communications. Newspapers also have a special set of issues that arise between them and government—notably the rights of reporters to protect sources of information and the conflict between the freedom of the press and access to information and the rights of an accused person to a fair trial. While the First Amendment and resulting controversies are highly dramatic, perhaps no less important are some of the more subtle relations between government and mass communications. For example, the magazine industry and to a lesser degree book publishing are highly sensitive to postal regulations. Low postage rates for magazines and books aid wide distribution and reduce product prices. The mails are to some extent the magazine industry's equivalent to the radio frequency spectrum.

A final feature of mass communications that helps distinguish this area of philanthropic activity from many others is our deep-rooted cultural ambiguity toward entertainment. More than anything else, mass communications offer entertainment to their consumers.

And although most of us eagerly seek that entertainment, we are ambivalent about it. The Calvinistic elements in our culture teach that entertainment is escape—at best frivolous and at worst the devil's work. Entertainment diverts us from the real, important and good tasks of life which are work and serious endeavor. At the same time the fun culture teaches that there are all too few chances in life for self-fulfillment through enjoyment and that we should seek entertainment and fun in as many ways and as much of the time as possible. It may be that our cultural myopia with respect to mass communications, our failure to examine them and to try and use them as wisely as possible, stems from this conflict between rejecting entertainment and seeking it out. The result has been that we use mass communications to the hilt and have television sets in every household and more radios than citizens, but pretend that mass communications are relatively unimportant and undeserving of the serious attention due education or medical care.

Embedded in all these characteristics and problems there is a central question for anyone interested in working in mass communications. It is simply this: In this time of rapid change, can we help seize the opportunity to design and implement mass communications that will better serve their users and enhance the lives of everyone?

PROGRAM GUIDELINES

Even though the choice of mass communications for the foundation's current field of operation represented a significant concentration of activities, mass communications itself is an enormous field. Three guidelines were chosen which have helped to focus the work of the foundation during the last six years, and they are the guidelines that continue to direct the work of the staff at this time.

The first of these is that more needs to be known about mass communications. Not only has cultural myopia prevented a fair share of attention to the media, but it is an area which has not easily fitted into the disciplinary interests of academicians. Mass communications is itself a disparate set of activities, industries, technologies and specialists. Much of the summary information easily available for other fields is not available here. Further, the study of the media ranges across law, engineering, economics, sociology, psychology and history. Ordinarily the subject of mass communications is only a minor interest in any one of these fields and rarely are several or all of these disciplines simultaneously brought to bear on the topic. This relative absence of information and an established pool of research talent devoted to the field is one of the problems the foundation has attempted to address. More needs to be known. More high quality people need to study the media. Research in this area needs to be encouraged.

Several different types of research are needed. We need more basic facts and information. We need analyses of the structures and processes of mass communications and theories about their workings. Since mass communications are also the subject of social policy, we need research that can be applied to current problems. Good work has been done in all these areas and is going on now, but there is not enough of it. One of the main reasons for this is the small amount of money available. Among private foundations the Markle and Ford Foundations have been the largest supporters of research on mass communications—federal funds have been available to some extent—but it remains an area of research characterized by too little money and too few good people.

The second guideline chosen by the foundation is that more needs to be done to improve professional performance within mass communications. Any occupation is only as good as the

people within it—recruitment, education, training and working conditions are vitally important. Because work in book publishing is very different than in broadcasting, and newspaper work is unlike the production of feature films, problems of professional performance must be examined separately in each area. For example, creative endeavor within book publishing often rests primarily on a single author assisted by an editor. The quality of the product is likely to be due overwhelmingly to these two people. In television, important creative input to a successful program may come from a host of people—producers, writers, actors, cameramen, film and tape editors. Book publishing tends to be an individual activity, television a team effort. Book publishing has a rich tradition of reviewing and criticism. Television and radio have little such tradition, but many observers believe that the quality of television and radio would be improved if appropriate critical standards were developed and regularly applied to radio and television programs. Books are much easier to review and criticize because they are almost permanently available. A television program may be shown only one time, but critical review can be applied to television series, and videotape and videodiscs may begin to make television reviewing more like the reviewing of books.

The third theme or guideline for the foundation's program is to try and find ways in which the mass media can be used to benefit subgroups of the population. The issue here is simply that inherent in the economics of mass communications is the drive to reach as many people as possible. By reaching more people either or both of two things can happen. Unit costs to consumers may be reduced and/or profits to the producers may be increased. Potential benefits to sub-groups of the population tend to get lost. In recent years there has been, for example, widespread attention to the viewing of television by young children. As

young children are not the major purchasers of products advertised on television and as they constitute a small proportion of television's total audience, their special needs and interests have not received great attention. The Markle Foundation has actively attempted to work on this problem with resources being provided for research, programming and citizen action groups. There is no doubt that exploration will show that the advantages of mass communications can also be applied in an economic way to the problems of other special audiences. In some cases such work is already underway.

CURRENT PROGRAM

Using these three guidelines, the staff and directors of the foundation continually examine specific areas where foundation support may be useful. New areas for exploration come both from ideas that are presented to the foundation and ideas that initiate with the staff and directors. Currently, some areas under examination are women and the media, ways of increasing the audience for public television, and media criticism. As we come to understand the issues and opportunities within each of these and other areas, some will be so compelling in significance and opportunity that a decision will be made to incorporate them into current programs of support. In other cases initial exploration will lead to a decision to go no further. Concurrently, each area of active foundation support is being assessed. This process results in a total program which is in gradual but constant change. At the one end, new work is being explored and decisions are made to go ahead or not. At the other end, current activities are examined to determine future viability. Periodically, some old activities are deemphasized and dropped as new activities are added.

In the last year the foundation placed major emphasis on cable television, research on the

relation between politics and the media, finding ways in which the media can provide greater benefits to the elderly, and the formation and effects of communications policy.

REQUESTS FOR FUNDS

This foundation like many others receives each year a very large number of requests for funds—well over six hundred in the last year. Many of these do not fit into the foundation's program and can be quickly eliminated from further consideration. Many others, however, do fit the policy of the foundation and are related to areas of current activity. Such requests come in many forms—a brief telephone call, an information letter, a personal conversation or a fully developed formal document. In each case it is the responsibility of the foundation to obtain enough information about the request so that it can be evaluated on its merits in relation to the foundation's current program and in comparison to other proposals before the foundation. A member of the foundation's staff will take the primary responsibility for each of these investigations and will ordinarily utilize a number of techniques. In addition to using his or her own knowledge and experience, the staff member is likely to talk with the proponent of the idea, request information from others in the field, and perhaps send the proposal to reviewers for comments. In almost all cases when a proposal is under serious investigation, a visit by a member of the staff to the organization or individual will be required before any final recommendation is made to the Board. The responsibility of the foundation does not end with the evaluation of ideas and plans. We take a personal and active interest in projects to assure insofar as possible the achievement of goals that are financially supported. Some significant ideas need clarification before they can be acted upon. Some projects are too large for the available administrative and personnel support. Budgets may be underestimated or inflated beyond what is

necessary. Unexpected events may disrupt a project. The foundation expects to work actively as a partner with potential and actual recipients of funds so that outcomes of supported projects will be in keeping with the great expectations with which they were begun. The total cost of a project is not a real measure of its significance. The real art of a foundation is to put together people, ideas, and money in such a way as to achieve beneficial results over and above those that money alone can buy.

