

Sang Bai

George Comstock is S.I. Newhouse Professor at the Newhouse School of Public Communications at Syracuse University, and one of the most productive and greatest scholars in the field of television and human behavior. His book, *Television and Human Behavior* (co-authored with Steven Chaffee, Natan Katzman, Maxwell McCombs, and Donald Roberts), was selected as one of the significant journalism and communication books of the twentieth century by *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly*. His recent publications include *Television: What's On, Who's Watching, and What It Means* (1999, co-authored with Erica Scharrer) and *Television and the American Child* (1991, co-authored with HaeJung Paik). He was selected as science advisor to the Surgeon General's Scientific Advisory Committee on Television and Social Behavior that issued the 1972 federal report, *Television and Growing up: the Impact of Televised Violence*. From 1991 to 1993, he was Chairman of the Department of Journalism and Communication of Chinese University, Hong Kong. His current projects include two additional publications: *Media and Politics* and *Handbook of Child Psychology*.

Stanford & Bogota

After receiving his Bachelor's degree in Journalism from the University of Washington and a Master's degree in Communication from Stanford, Comstock spent two years working as a reporter for *The San Francisco Examiner*. In his desire to further his professional work, he returned to Stanford in 1960 to study for his Ph.D. By the time he had finished his course work for the degree, Stanford had a contract with the Peace Corps to do evaluative research on an educational television project in Bogota, Colombia. He lived in Bogota for two years as the in-residence project supervisor, conducting surveys and experiments. In 1966, Comstock published his first publication, *The Peace Corps Educational Television (ETV) Project in Colombia: Two Years of Research*. "It would be fair to say that my involvement in television started from there," he said, "but (the focus on television research)....I think was really more of an accident that television was one of the major concerns of the Institute for Communication Research at Stanford in terms of the new medium."

Three Mentors

Comstock considers that he had three mentors who most influenced his thinking and research: Richard F. Carter, Nathan Maccoby, and Wilbur Schramm, with Carter being the biggest influence. While he was at Stanford, Carter was his first advisor, and Comstock worked for him as a graduate assistant: "Carter was a real role model, in the sense that he thought in very broad and abstract terms. I do not think he ever encountered anybody whose ideas he could not incorporate into a larger system that was his. So everything quickly became a sub-category of something that belonged to him in a discussion."

Nathan Maccoby was a psychologist specializing in attitude change, and got his education with Carl Hovland in the Yale Attitude Change program. He was the main investigator in the Peace Corps project. Comstock said, "Maccoby introduced me to the practical consequences of doing research in the field and also living abroad." Wilbur Schramm is considered the founder of communication study (Chaffee & Rogers, 1997). Comstock explained the reasons why he named Schramm: "First of all, it turned out that he gave me a place to work. Second, he liked my stuff very much. I am the most cited person in his last book. He once wrote a long, maybe twenty pages, book review of my 'Television and Human Behavior' series." Comstock said, "Schramm would consider himself the inventor of this kind of writing in communication—the putting stuff together that other people could understand."

The Art and Craft of Synthesizing Research

Under Carter's "big theoretical influence," Comstock has always looked for the largest idea, and then scaled down to sub-categories that allow him to organize things into various parts. For example, he looked at television as a medium on a "comprehensive basis," then organized it around the basic themes of audience, persuasion, politics, advertising, learning, education, etc. He called this principle the "art and craft of research synthesis." "I am much more interested in putting stuff together than in any given topic," Comstock continued, "so children and media are sort of like an accident. I am a recognized authority of the field because I have written a book on it and I have done chapters on it in other books. But I am not really interested terribly in children and media, but I am interested in the ways to synthesize and make sense out of this research area."

Secrets for Being "Productive"

Professor Comstock explained how he has been able to be so productive. He argues that the person who seeks to be "productive" should have some degree of discipline. He said, "If you have a commitment to something, you should get something done on it every day. Discipline is very important because if stuff gets too far ahead of you, then basically the task becomes unmanageable." In addition, he asserts that it is very important to cut down tasks into do-able portions for being productive: "The first thing you do is to cut it, chop it up.....according to a Chinese saying, 'the beginning of a long journey is a single step,'" he said. "But there is a problem—if the journey is too long, you are afraid to take the first step because there are so many things that must follow." Whenever he wrote a publication, he always worked on things in sections, which means that once he finished the first chapter, he passed the draft to his secretary to type, cleared his table of every material related to the first chapter, and started fresh on the second topic.

Answering the question, "Why is it that several scholars start at the same starting point, and twenty years later, some becomes famous while others are unnoticed?"

Comstock gave the example of Ray Funkhauser and Maxwell McCombs in the area of agenda setting. Funkhauser published his research on agenda setting at the same time that McCombs was getting into the area. “Now the difference between them is Funkhauser never pursued agenda setting as a research interest after that while McCombs has made agenda setting one of his major interests and focused students’ dissertations on it. The point is that he has kept in there and he has basically sort of made his reputation.” Therefore, to stick to a certain topic and build on it could be the “secret” for being productive, and prominent in a particular field. Comstock considers that just doing one article and moving on to a new topic is a bad idea. He insisted that researchers should have at least a partial thematic focus in their research.

The Relationship between Scholarly Work and General Life

“I would rather not ever do anything, in the sense that it would be nice to say that I am done,” Comstock said. He considers that his scholarly work and his life in general have been well integrated together. “I do not see a huge conflict,” he said, “personal interests sometimes get reflected or turn out to be useful in what you are doing.” In other words, even though we cannot see any immediate application of our personal interests—for his example, reading a five hundred page book on the history of be-bop music (Comstock is a huge fan of jazz)—we cannot say that it is completely irrelevant to our scholarly life. He considers that other systems, such as the theory and technique of writing a new form of music, can be instructive in other areas of thinking.

As a matter of fact, he does not feel it is necessary to try to find the distinctions between his life in general and his scholarly world. Comstock’s whole life is integrated into the field of television and human behavior: “I am not really thinking about retiring yet.” Comstock said, “as long as there is a chance that I can get this book, “Media and Politics” out, it says George Comstock, Syracuse University, as opposed to Professor Emeritus or something like that.” In other words, his new work will have more influence because he is still actively contributing to research, study, and the education of a new generation of scholars. As his participation in the field continues and his body of work continues to grow, George Comstock’s legacy as a major contributor to the field of communication and the influence of television on society is assured.