

# Does 'General Public' Really Exist?

IT'S QUITE a shock to be told that something you had supposed you were a part of all your life doesn't really exist.

That happened the other day when I read that a University of Maryland researcher had studied the matter and concluded that there is no such thing as a "general public."

As a newspaper reporter I wrote for what I perceived to be the "general public." As an editorial writer I sometimes expounded on what was believed to be views of the "general public." Merchants talk about doing business with the "general public."

But the professor just might be right. It is possible that there is no such thing as a "general public."

"Publics come about when they face a common problem," James Grunig explained in a report speech. "They recognize the problem, communicate, and then organize to do something about it."

Some publics are single issue groups, others are apathetic, and many are concerned with a variety of special interests.

Carrying that reasoning farther, we might look at the election of public officials, presumably by the "general public." In a major election, most of those eligible to vote cast ballots, but in many elections, only a fraction of them turn out. Thus, officials take offices as selections of a majority of a minority.

While certain candidates would have you believe that millions are forever hungry, reducing pill manufactureres and exercise houses imply the "general public" is overfed and underworked.

Entertainment programs and certain advertisements might give the impression that the "general public" is a bunch of wild, ill-mannered, violent people, but this isn't substantiated in most neighborhoods. There are a lot of honest, respectable people.

We may assume that government is supported by the general public but tax collectors go where the money is available and that is mainly successful corporations and American "middle class" workers. The very rich and the very poor pay

smaller shares.

Congress and the legislature might be expected to enact laws and make appropriations with the "general public" in mind but it appears laws often are passed to satisfy small "pressure groups" and appropriations are made to appease special interests.

Quite a few firms are in business to find out what the general public thinks about an issue, a product, or itself. No matter what the question may be, opinions will differ.

Candidates for major offices employ such firms to make surveys they hope will show them to be favorites to win.

Allegations have been made that such devices may be used to manipulate decisions of the "general public." In 1980, television commentators used partial election returns and surveys to award the outcome of the presidential election before polls closed.

If there is such a body as the "general public," its right hand may not always know what its left hand is doing.