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THE DONALD McGANNON COMMUNICATION RESEARCH CENTER

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Professor George Gerbner
Dean Emeritus
Annenberg School of Communication
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3620 Walnut Street
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Dear George,

My colleagues and I read with interest and enthusiasm your, I can only call it, Manifesto, on the global deculturalization being perpetrated by the great media machine.

Enclosed is an essay entry to be published in the new Dictionary of Theology coming out next year from the UK. I think it is in your line of country.

I would welcome your comments and would hope to collaborate in some way with your plans for critical campaigning. The looming replay of 1988 media politics seems an appropriate occasion.

All the best and continued success in your effective projects.

Cordially,

Jack

Dictionary of Theology and Society

Edited by Paul A.B. Clarke and Andrew Linzey

Entry:

MEDIA

by

John M. Phelan

Routledge
Academic Reference
Mr. Mark Barragry, Editor

MEDIA

Definitions

"Media" is the plural of "medium." "Media" is shorthand for "mass media of communication" in advanced technological society. "Medium" refers to a single method of encoding and delivering messages to a broad public; thus, radio is a medium, television is a medium, newspapers constitute one medium; lumping together radio and television in all their forms give us the electronic media; agglomerating newspapers and magazines gives us the print media. Both print and electronic media in all their forms make up "the media" *tout court.* Note that this physical conception of the media is essentially technological, that is, each of the media is not defined merely as the end product in the hands of the consumer/reader/viewer. Each medium is defined as an integrated system of invention, composition, presentation, and delivery. As a mass medium, newspapers must be seen as a factory system of daily predictable output that involves brains, hands, paper, ink, steel and wheels. Borrowing from computer terminology, the media are hardware systems for handling the software of information, enlightenment, entertainment. Generally, one speaks of the media in an all-inclusive sense that embraces both the physical system and its delivered messages, often called programming (from electronic media) or content (from print media).

"The medium is the message," a phrase of Marshall McLuhan's that the media have made universally known, should be understood therefore in two senses: first, the final display method or format of mass mediated programming has a determining or at least limiting effect on whatever is said or shown *on the medium*; second, the integrated technological organization of a given medium invites or discourages certain types of messages, programming, or content processed *through the sys-*

tem because of the system's own internal needs. Thus, on a system where time is money, the sound-bite, slogan, or jingle is the preferred unit of political meaning; on a system where central control is paramount, interminable speeches from the maximum leader are preferred. But given the choice, viewers will prefer the diverting jingle over the long speech because of the display capabilities of the medium. There is no market for bootlegged television speeches of Castro in New York, but MTV is worldwide and contraband videos of cause-related rock concerts are globally popular. Singapore, a centrally controlled authoritarian city-state where time is money, uses its media to enforce policy through slickly produced television minutes, filled with music, handsome young people, and the vacuous hope that marks product advertising in the West.

Rapid advances in communication technology have blurred the distinctions among media systems. More and more print media are processed electronically and the same kind of computer systems process words, music, images, and format displays. This is reflected in ownership patterns, where the same company, like Sony, manufactures recording and display hardware and contracts musicians to own the final "product:" recorded songs or music videos. Newspaper empires often include television stations and satellite systems that can distribute not only television and radio but digitally encoded newspapers, including layout and typeface, to receiving printing plants around the world. Cable system operators buy film studios so they can have a stock of software for their hardware.

The mass media of communication have enormous costs of maintenance which require either state support or commercial revenue or some combination of the two. Whatever the source of support, its size can only be justified by an equally enormous efficiency, return on investment or palpable political effects on the populace. The mass media thus tend to be servants of the established order and legitimizers of the status quo whether they glamorize British royalty, urge higher Russian

production quotas, encourage smaller Chinese families, or happiness-through-purchase in America.

These enormous trends toward centralization and homogeneity still do permit room for the occasional "auteur" film of individual artistry, the profoundly critical television documentary, the journalistic exposé of corruption in high places, and other examples of independent thinking or original art. But the audience for such works is limited. The book, for so long the intellectual medium for innovation, discovery, and critical awareness, has become part of the book business, which has fallen, necessarily, to the "blockbuster syndrome." Great books and good books are still published and some even turn a profit, but the book business is increasingly prey to the bottom line which is enhanced by the reflections of, and narrations about, celebrities from other media.

There is a significant but relatively minute counter-trend to such mainstream monoliths. New technologies centered around the increasingly more powerful personal computer are enabling smaller entrepreneurs and public interest groups to publish newsletters and produce radio and video cassettes of an "alternative" provenance that criticizes the mainstream. Green, feminist, gay, and some minority religious movements have made effective use of "alternative media" in the West, as have outlawed political oppositionist movements from South Africa to Sri Lanka. By being user-friendly, communication production relying on such "desktop" techniques demystifies the process and encourages non-professional use. But the media system is one of distribution as well as production and the former seems firmly in the control of large entities: corporations, major religions, and nation-states.

Converging ownerships, interlocking technologies, and a common mass consumption all conspire to join the various media into one great media system. This is observed in the increasing legitimacy of "media" as a singular noun, which conjures up the image of a television supermarket, with hundreds, thousands, millions of screens all showing the same picture at once, with legions of speakers playing the same rock

music, all promoting a film showing in hundreds of thousands of small identical theaters worldwide on the same day. The media is the medium.

Principal Ideas

An enormous amount of research has been aimed at the media by both its exploiters and its critics. Advertisers, media owners, and their managers are greatly concerned about the numbers of people they reach, about what kinds of messages move people to act the way they want, and about the inclination of those they reach to return to the same media source. Because of the presumed motives of those who commission it, this type of research is often termed "administrative," and it is conceptually based on the transmission model of communication. A message is aimed at a specific target through a given medium with some kind of effect. A variant of this is the (Harold) Lasswell formula: Who says what to whom with what effect? — a formula at least as old as Quintilian.

This conceptualization is result-oriented and sees communication as producing effects, much as fertilizer grows grass or cue balls knock eight balls. Thus the "effectiveness" of media campaigns to get people to buy soap or adopt birth control or vote Conservative is what is sought to be measured and the measure is tangible and finite: so many votes, so many (less) children, so many boxes of detergent. The psychological theory underpinning this kind of research is most often functionalism, which sees all voluntary human activity as motivated by the desire to find out what is going on, by the need to get along with others, and by the urge to work out internal conflicts through some external symbol system. The last "function" is explicitly Freudian in premise and much programming, self-consciously or instinctively, exploits feelings connected with sex, self-esteem, or insecurity to motivate consumers.

Although administrative research still constitutes the vast bulk of media research because of the resources of business, government, and other large organizations who command media, there is a growing body of research springing from an entirely different set of concerns. These are the fears and grievances of those out of the power loop of media control and the desires of social critics and intellectuals to understand the meaning and significance of media among individuals, societies, and cultures. Although in fact there is no reason why the transmission model could not be used for much of this research – as it is, for instance, in studying the effects of pornography on youth – the preponderant model leans away from the concern for concrete mechanical effects characteristic of the transmission model and leans toward what is loosely termed the ritualistic model. This model is more akin to anthropology and other cultural studies (as the other is closer to engineering and sociology). Here the interest is in discovering what kind of mentality is encouraged by the daily ritual of being exposed to mass media, with the emphasis on television, the most powerful and pervasive of the mass media in the industrialized world (and second only to radio, which it is overtaking, in the developing world). "Mentality" embraces a broad sweep of cognate concepts: "consciousness," "values," "social character," "psychological type," "psychographics," "political awareness," "leisure competence," and so forth. These in turn entail a variety of methods, including that of the literary or theatrical critic.

Because much of the pioneering work in this type of research was done by members of the Frankfurt School of Social Research (notably H. Marcuse, M. Hochheimer, T. Adorno, W. Benjamin), known for so-called Critical Theory, the great variety of this research is distinguished from the administrative by calling it critical research, following the distinction made in 1941 by Paul Lazarsfeld, a pioneer of modern administrative research.

Development

News is a common feature of most media systems around the world and its transformations illustrate the nature of modern media systems as well as the guiding models for understanding media.

As the name implies, news is information about some recent event, deviating from expected routine. In the ancient world, official messengers brought news of military victory or defeat, natural disasters, notice of future unscheduled events. But for the most part, routine ruled human affairs and "news" as we think we know it began with business, when trading associations in Northern Europe shared information about commodity prices and other conditions that would affect profit, developing newsletters with the new print technology.

Mass media news is descended from this basic human practice of sharing and spreading information, but modern high technology and the political economy it serves have altered its nature.

First, news promulgation is now part of an industrial process which needs predictability and continuity. Thus, newspapers and news programs appear at an invariant daily, even hourly, schedule, with roughly the same amount of space and time allotted to news on a continuing basis. If there is some unprecedented cataclysm, more time or space may be allotted, but rarely is the news curtailed merely because fewer events happened. News has become a manufactured commodity, so its content is made to fit the amount of time or space routinely allotted for it. This, of course, changes the nature to news from that of the unexpected to that of the routine, for the most part. The characters may change and details may vary, but a relatively constant mix of crime, politics, entertainment, and business affairs will be stretched or shrunk to fit its Procrustean medium. The designers of the format of the news, even if guided solely by system needs of predictability and control, still have had an impact on what people will think about, the categories un-

der which they will arrange their experience, and so forth. Media technology affects thought.

News program managers, relying on administrative research, have discovered that in fact people who look at television news, for instance, do not do so in order to stay abreast of current affairs so much as they seek company and reassurance in a society that is increasingly mobile and without the marketplace or waterwell for friendly gossip and story-telling.

So the nature of the news program is adjusted, now requiring attractive and friendly news-presenters, who joke and chat among themselves with an inclusive nod to the camera. They advise one on cooking, dining out, making friends, staying healthy. But these "news teams" are paid companions, whose loyalty is not to their audiences but to their employers, who in turn are answerable to advertisers and/or the state. Their cozy personal advice thus often dovetails with advertised products or the government's current theme for public cooperation, be it paying taxes early or recycling trash or avoiding excessive cholesterol. The news has in this way become a format for socialization and acculturation in no small measure.

What is true of news is true of entertainment, education, or religion processed by the media system: the technology of the medium creates formats that are shaped for maximum effect by administrative research into a ritual whose ultimate social and cultural (and, therefore, moral and ethical impact) is analysed by critical research.

Ethical and Moral Issues

One must distinguish between moral and ethical issues that arise *within the context* of the media and those that are raised by *the nature of the system.*

Among the former we have a very familiar list of legitimate concerns:

> The differential rights of individuals, corporations, and governments to secrecy versus the public's right to know.
>
> Objectivity and fairness in coverage of controversial issues.
>
> The effects of pornography and other portrayals of objectionable or criminal acts on the impressionable.
>
> The validity of advertising claims and the exploitation of certain basic insecurities as a motivation for buying marginal products
>
> News management and influence peddling on the part of government, business, labor, churches, or any powerful interest group.
>
> The rights of journalists to protect their sources and their unpublished notes (in whatever medium) from unauthorized use.
>
> The obligations of journalists to reveal information to appropriate authority to protect life and property.

The "morally correct" behaviour to be sought among these settings is usually obvious from commonplace sources and does not require any "special media ethics." Various professional guilds, trade associations, and public interest groups have come up with guidelines for proper behaviour that cover most of the common cases under the above rubrics, honored though some may be more in the breach.

Far from obvious are the ethically appropriate approaches to the problems of pornography, glamourized violence, and stereotyping of any kind, especially racial or sexual. But the moral complexity does not spring so much from the nature of media as from the nature of art and fiction: Portrayal as an invitation to imitation or justification for immoral behaviour is a thorny problematic that both antedates and exceeds the context of modern media as such. In general, the transmission model has been applied here most unfruitfully, because its mechanistic presuppositions have led to the imposition or violation of taboos (nudity, *Grand Guignolism*, etc.).

In other words, almost all of the above cases can be adequately dealt with in principle within the common expectations of the system: if the media work properly, they will behave properly. It is a matter of adjustment, power, and will — not so much understanding.

This is not true for those issues raised by the very nature of the system: when the media work properly, they may behave improperly and in some cases they may necessarily so behave.

The growing indispensability of mass media for reaching electorates, political parties, church congregations, the entire youth population and even widely dispersed intellectuals, has forced not only politicians but educators, clergy, and scientists to join merchants in adapting their messages to fit the exigencies of the media system. Eastern bloc politicians as well as electronic preachers have a common need for media consultants.

These media adaptations reach back into the substance of the senders and alter, in varying degrees, politics, religion, education. Even dissent and avant-gardism must now define themselves as over against mainstream media content and programming, which gives an unearned cachet to willed obscurantism.

In what senses are these developments for good or ill?

As we have seen, the techno-logic of mass media hardware is to reach larger and larger audiences. In principle, the drive of the machine is to reach everybody in the world simultaneously with the same message. The political economies within which media operate also mandate maximum use either for maximum profit or maximum control. The software must follow the hardware. And the software is nothing less than the symbolic transmission of culture.

Over the years, therefore, mass media have developed a language of their own, a meta-language, if you will, that may have local dialects of

French or Chinese or Urdu. The curse of Babylon fragments the world audience, so it must be somehow overcome: the point of the meta-language is therefore accessibility; it must be readily understood by the largest number of people.

The image, as film distributors learned early, transcends the limitations of words. Nonetheless, as they later learned, even images have a cultural setting. Thus, for truly international distribution, films had to have slightly different versions so as not to offend local taboos. In multi-ethnic markets, advertising agencies have set up departments to research the effects of images and words on cultural sensitivities. The Chinese, as legend has it, were thus saved from marketing a car called The Lemon and male underwear called Pansies to English-speaking cultures.

The ideal of the media meta-language, let us call it mediaspeak, is to come as close as possible to a transcultural, a-historical, assumption free Esperanto, that evokes no particular heritage or tradition. It aspires to be the broader equivalent of those indispensable graphic icons at international airports for toilets, luggage, cocktails, cabs and medical assistance. The export and import of consumer goods for supermarket shelves, the internationalization of personal computers with a common user icon-driven interface abet the global demand for a common reductive language.

But language is also the vehicle for morality, judgment, subtle analysis, religious tradition. The Christian cross or the Buddha are symbols; they have subtle evocative meanings, a penumbra of connotations. Airport graphics are not symbols, but signals, extensions of traffic directions for those already launched on a decided course. Mediaspeak strips language of its symbolic meanings, of its historical and traditional resonances, and pares words and pictures down to signals. It is an ideal system for selling products and a very ideal system for dictatorships and dirigiste regimes.

This single development has multiple moral effects. Vast treasures have been spent by a bankrupt United States on the Strategic Defense Initiative, an adolescent fantasy of total protection that scores of serious scientists have scorned as both dangerous and meretricious. But the cartoon graphics of "Star Wars" in mass media have maintained sufficient support among the people to force a sceptical Congress to authorize continued billions of dollars.

The published statistics on Patriot missile effectiveness in the Middle East indicate miserable failure, but the pictures have mobilized not only cheering mass support, but serious arms sales among professional dealers.

While noting the force of images of suffering to mobilize aid for disaster victims, one must remember that the images often obscure the culprits and causes of the suffering so that symptoms are inadequately addressed while causes are blithely ignored, as in Ethiopia, Iraq, and Bangladesh.

These and other examples of the moral threat of mediaspeak in the contexts of religion, education, politics, and science abound — all occasions when the media system operates as everyone expects it to.

The quotidian ethical problems of the media business require serious attention, but they are minuscule before the tidal wave of a-moral de-culturalization the global media system is creating.

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