Smaller Than Life:

Teachers and Schools in the Mass Media

Universal public education in our time is not only the product of the school system but also a by-product of the mass media system. What are some images—and tasks—of education in a culture transformed through mass communications? This article explores some aspects of the relationship between the schools and mass media.

By GEORGE GERBNER

TWO cultural offsprings of the industrial revolution grew up side by side. These siblings are the system of formal universal public education, the schools, and the system of informal universal public education, the mass media.

The mass media system is the direct descendant of technology, mass production, and mass markets. It was ideally suited to the demands of industrial culture, to its need for rapid, standardized reproduction and distribution of commodities to heterogeneous, anonymous, mass audiences, too large to interact face-to-face.

Formal education had to fight all the way. It is not so easily mechanized, not so cheaply organized, not so readily standardized, and not so handily merchandised.

The Founding Fathers tried to protect the integrity of both systems of popular culture from the main threat *they* knew: strong, unrepresentative government. The press, by constitutional commission, and education, by constitutional omission, escaped centralized public development and control. But, although exempt from the laws of the republic, the mass media were subject to the laws of industrial development. These laws required organization, concentration, mechanization, and control—if not public, then private. By comparison, public schools remained the last major folk institution of advanced industrial society.

While the political, economic, and cultural centers of gravity have steadily shifted from the local to the national scene, major responsibility for educational development remained delegated to relatively weak political subdivisions. While television was made available free and equal to all across the nation, and while broadcasting tripled its revenues, our massive national effort in higher education—the G.I. bill—came to an end. Each year, a hundred thousand college-caliber youth could not go to college, for financial reasons. Higher education, we found, never got 40 per cent of the top one-fourth of our high-school graduates.

The mass media appeared increasingly to take over democratic national responsibilities for illuminating the realities of today and setting the agenda for tomorrow.

How did they fulfill that responsibility? As well as could be expected; sometimes even better. Being free from public control but lacking economic support in using that freedom, the mass media must, on the whole, merchandise such gratifications as can be profitably cultivated under the circumstances.

The agenda of life's business as seen by the mass media is not easy for educators to perceive. Only systematic study can lift the blinders each

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of us wears as a matter of choice, temperament, or habit. So let me mention a few areas of concern to education in which we have scratched the surface. These have a direct relation to preparing young people for the life they will live tomorrow, as well as to the educational enterprise and profession.

The 'Idols of Consumption' Triumphant

My first case study might be called a story of success. A by now classic study of biographies in popular magazines[1] traced the growth of attention devoted to personal success stories in the first half of the twentieth century. But more remarkable than the growth itself were the changes in the *kinds* of personalities which symbolized success. Before World War I three-fourths of these models of achievement came from political life, industry, and the professions. Forty years later the "idols of production" gave way to the "idols of consumption." Aside from political figures, in nine out of ten cases the latter-day celebrity's chief claim to fame was stardom in the world of the mass media and the markets they served.

The celebrity cult is not a simple affair. Matt Dillon outdraws the election returns. Several TV stars are more familiar to a test panel of two thousand viewers than an ex-president of the United States who does not or cannot become a TV star himself. About one out of four magazines on the newsstands can be classified in the fan-romance category. Half of the lives immortalized on "This is Your Life," 76 per cent of those personalized on "Person-to-Person," and 69 per cent of those interviewed on "The Mike Wallace Interview" came from entertainment and the mass media. Such celebrities account for over 40 per cent of all paperback biographies in print. The size of the Hollywood press corps just about equals the combined memberships of the education writers' and science writers' associations. The much-publicized *McCall's* list of "The Most Exciting Reading of Our Time" features such famous non-authors of non-books as Zsa Zsa Gabor, Fred Astaire, Arlene Francis, Keenan Wynn, Jack Paar, Art Linkletter, and poor Marilyn Monroe.[2]

So much for the story of success. My second case study might be entitled "A Study in Failure."

We know that by and large the teacher in literature is too often an inhibited, sexless prune (with apologies to Dr. Dichter, the motivation expert hired some time ago to improve the image of the prune industry). As an early student of the subject put it, the teacher in literature is likely to be "stooped, gaunt, and grey with weariness. His suit has the shine of shabby gentility and hangs loose from his undernourished frame."[3] That is, unless class is out and memory rings the school bell, when we say a tearful "Good Morning, Miss Dove," or bid a nostalgic "Goodby, Mr. Chips."

But perhaps memory fails us. So we did a study of eighty-one American movies produced since 1950 which portray teachers in leading or supporting parts.[4] Since most movies involve love, and since love has a peculiar affinity to humanity, a look at love and the teacher will give us a good measure of his human stature on the screen.

His opportunities for love were virtually unlimited. Although male teachers outnumbered female teachers (this is not surprising in the predominantly male world of the mass media), six out of ten male and nine out of ten female teachers were unmarried at the beginning of the picture. Alas, most of them were unmarried also at the end of the picture.

Not that they didn't try. They just didn't try hard enough. With so many unmarried teachers running around, it was inevitable that some of them would run into their colleagues of the opposite sex. But the encounter fizzled five times out of six.

With all the happy endings in the movies, a teacher's chances of success in love with *anybody* were fifty-fifty. The most common condition of success in love was (1) that the teacher find a partner without college education, or (2) that the teacher leave the teaching profession. The typical pattern has her quitting a New England high school and a biology teacher fiance to "find herself" and a *man* in New York. Or it has him leaving a dull musical chair at a Western college, along with a straitlaced professor girl friend, to be taught something about music and love in Tin-pan Alley.

With such a pattern of romantic success among screen pedagogues, what need be said about failure? Well, failure in love permitted teachers to remain fully dedicated to the profession. And it permitted their would-be partners to escape into the stronger, warmer arms of less educated but apparently more human creatures.

The film teacher leaving the profession usually goes to greener pastures. The still youthful screen teacher shown as going into some other specific

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[1] Leo Lowenthal, "Biographies in Popular Magazines." In *Reader in Public Opinion and Communication*, edited by Bernard Berelson and Morris Janowitz. Glencoe, Ill.: The Free Press, 1950.

[2] Patrick Hazard, "The Entertainer as Hero." Paper read at the Association for Education in Journalism convention at Pennsylvania State University, August, 1960.

[3] Arthur Foff, "The Teacher as Hero," in *Readings in Education*, edited by Arthur Foff and Jean Grambs. New York: Harper's, 1956. p. 21.

[4] Jack Schwartz, "The Portrayal of Educators in Motion Pictures, 1950-58," *The Journal of Educational Sociology*, October, 1960.

occupation appeared to know what it takes to be *really* successful. Five times out of six, he became an entertainer.

In a related study we analyzed fifty-six fiction stories dealing with teachers or schools in *The Saturday Evening Post*.[5] The general character profile of teachers turned out to be quite different from the profile of other characters in the stories. Most teachers were represented as coming from the outside, as aliens to the community, often in conflict with the community. They were out of tune not only with most community activities but also with the goals and aspirations of most other story characters.

Although teachers were shown as not striving for material success nearly as much as other adult characters, teachers (as well as students and schools) were more frequently portrayed in material and financial difficulty. As one solution to this problem, about one-third of all teacher-characters quit the profession. In no story was a teacher ever given a salary raise. No student was supported on a public scholarship. No community took the initiative to build or improve schools. There was no normal way in which the financial difficulties of teachers, students, and schools could be resolved. Some degree of poverty was presented as the usual state of affairs. If any solutions were given, they were likely to be fantasy solutions such as hitting the jack-pot, finding a rich donor, or holding a fantastically successful sports event. The usual practice of civilized society, financing public schools through normal tax support, was absent from the world of commercial fiction.

Are There Signs of Improvement?

Maybe all this is changing. There are certainly encouraging signs in a great deal of serious and responsible news coverage and publicity given to problems of schools and education. But perhaps the cultural attitudes reflected in the selection of fiction and drama are more deep-seated than is the official thinking reflected in overtly informational materials.

Although our press devotes an increasing amount of space to news of education, and the number of education reporters is increasing, there are still only about a hundred full-time reporters specializing in education in 1,700 daily newspapers in the United States, most of which employ a sports editor. A recent study of education news in daily newspapers, by Gloria Dapper and Barbara Carter in the March 17, 1962, *Saturday Review*, found that, "in general—but with notable exceptions—the local newspaper, in the name of education reporting, concentrates on student extracurricular activities, teacher appointments and activities, school finance and buildings, scholarships, honors and awards, the school bus, PTA notes, and a variety of news about colleges." The study came to the conclusion that, "if you depend on your local newspaper for information on education, chances are you have virtually no information or perspective on the major national issues in education and only the most fragmentary view of even the local school picture."

There *are* notable exceptions. But the picture is far from reassuring.

Biased Coverage of NEA Convention

In 1961 the Institute of Communications Research at Illinois collected every newspaper story and editorial published about the National Education Association convention. We wanted to know how the convention's message about the state and problems of American education was transmitted by the daily press to the American people.

The federal aid bill was pending in Congress when the NEA met in Atlantic City. President Kennedy termed the bill the most important piece of domestic legislation. The extension of federal aid to schools was favored by 65 per cent of Americans in a Gallup Poll. Demonstration of the need for federal aid to schools was a major effort of the convention.

But the general pattern of press coverage precluded—to put it mildly—the clear development of any such message. Senator Wayne Morse gave the major address on the bill before the convention's Legislative Commission. Most newspaper stories reported his off-the-cuff criticism of the Catholic church on the parochial issue, elicited by a question after the speech, but made little or no reference to the content of the speech.

The convention passed a resolution supporting the bill. Seven delegates spoke for the resolution, two in opposition. All news stories cited the opposition. The major wire story even cited a floor motion made which died for lack of a second. (The motion was against aid to parochial schools, thus again injecting the conflict element which had done so much to prevent passage of similar bills in the past.) But there was no place in the stories for the voices or arguments on behalf of the almost unanimously approved resolution.

Editorial comment was almost 100 per cent opposed. Editorials warned about "a well-organized pressure group" using children as "pawns" in a cynical game of power politics. They made repeated references to "the blandishments of fed-

[5] This and the convention press study (discussed below) are as yet unpublished. I would like to acknowledge the assistance of Roger Brown in summarizing some preliminary findings of the magazine analysis cited above.

eral munificence" spurring efforts of "teacher lobbyists" to "fast-talk" Congress "out of some cash." The school-aid bill was editorially characterized as "only the beginning" of a "sensational fiscal binge." Editorials warned of "appeals to emotion of the parents and taxpayers" as tactics characteristic of a "big teachers' lobby." One editorial drew the "logical inference" that teachers would not hesitate to blackmail parents and taxpayers; another even cautioned that they would "sell our free system into the bondage of a federal bureaucracy" to grab "another pot of gold at the end of a rainbow."

A few weeks later the bill was defeated in the House. Defeat of the bill prevented the allocation of resources for narrowing the gap of educational inequality. It perpetuated a situation in which 98 per cent of Wisconsin students complete high school while less than half of those in Virginia, South Carolina, Georgia, Kentucky, and Mississippi do so. Who will measure the cost of this "saving" of money in terms of wasted lives and squandered human resources in the richest country on earth? This is the real "gap" which—if anything—will count in the world in the long run. The gap is in ways of meeting the imperatives of the world industrial, scientific, and cultural revolutions.

This, then, is what concerns me. It is that, on the whole, the mass media play an uneasy double role as the cultural arms of a private corporate system and, at the same time, as the informal public educational agencies of modern society. The pattern of industrial behavior recorded in the media's portrayal of teachers and education exhibits earmarks of tension and of a crossing of institutional purposes.

What can we do about it?

Three Courses of Planning and Action

I would like to suggest three courses of planning and of action. One has to do with professional relations with the mass media. The second involves relations with the community. And the third is a suggestion for making our curriculum more adequate to the demands of twentieth century popular culture and its institutions.

A recent study conducted by researchers at Stanford University about voters and their schools[6] is instructive in these respects. The researchers wanted to know how a favorable vote on school bond issues related to the various sources of information about schools. It was found that the voters who were involved in some personal participation or contact with school representatives and who had direct access to information about schools were *twice as likely* to vote favorably as those who relied for information on the mass media.

These results, as well as the case studies I have reported, are food for thought. They mean that schools have much to do in the way of improving their relations with mass media and of improving the quality of educational reporting, even if there is little they can do about vested editorial interests.

Secondly, they mean that under our present institutional circumstances there is no substitute for the hard way of encouraging more participation, bringing more adults into the schools, trying to educate parents directly. The mass media must still be helped and encouraged to function as representatives of the public interest. But other bridges must also be built and other channels must be found to achieve a realistic public understanding of the needs and problems of modern education.

Third, our curriculum must reflect the needs and demands of twentieth century popular culture more than it does now.

The mass media have immeasurably enriched our lives. They also have the capacity for narcotizing us, for insulating us from some realities of life, and for stacking the cards against broad public access to all information and even entertainment necessary for self-government.

These potentialities of mass-produced popular culture pose a challenge and a responsibility for curriculum builders. It makes little difference whether we think about this under the heading of social studies or citizenship or English or literature or special studies on the mass media. We must help our students to use the riches offered by the mass media. We must also help them to make some order out of the distortions, confusions, and chaos created by the mass media. Most important of all, we must help them make intelligent decisions not only as consumers but also as citizens, building and molding social institutions—including the media—for democratic human purposes.

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[6] See, e.g., Wilbur Schramm, "Mass Media and Educational Policy," in *Social Forces Influencing American Education*, The Sixtieth Yearbook of the NSSE, edited by Nelson B. Henry. Chicago: The University of Illinois Press, 1961.

► The sixty university presses in this country now publish about one-fourth of all our serious, nonfiction books. The largest of these sixty is Harvard, which publishes about 100 titles a year, followed by Chicago, Columbia, California, Yale, Princeton, and Stanford. Usually about one-third of the books published by a university press are authored by faculty members, according to Leon Seltzer, director of the Stanford University Press.