Mass Media Policies in Changing Cultures

Edited by

GEORGE GERBNER
The Annenberg School of Communications
University of Pennsylvania

A WILEY-INTERSCIENCE PUBLICATION

JOHN WILEY & SONS, New York · London · Sydney · Toronto

CONTENTS

CHAPTER 18

Comparative Cultural Indicators

GEORGE GERBNER

Developments in communication have extended the human ability to exchange messages and have transformed the symbolic environment of human consciousness. Perhaps that most profound dilemma is that just as knowledge can be said to confer power, so power generates and uses knowledge for its own purposes. Social and institutional structures (governments, broadcasting networks, publishing houses, and educational institutions) have a steadily increasing role in shaping the symbolic environment.

Self-government can no longer be supposed to follow from the assumption that the press and other communication agencies are free. In a highly centralized mass-production structure of the kind characterizing modern communication, "freedom" is the right of the managers to decide what the public will be told. The question is whether further enlightenment can lead to liberation from the shackles of mind and body that still oppress mankind or whether liberation from those shackles can lead to further enlightenment.

That final issue divides modern societies and calls for evenhanded—if not necessarily detached—investigation. Capitalist and socialist, orthodox and revolutionary, pre- and postindustrial, and other types of societies vary in the solutions they promise and further differ in the performance they deliver. There is probably no area of significant social policy in which far-reaching decisions are made with so little reliable information about the actual state of affairs as in the sphere of the mass production and distribution of the most broadly shared messages of national cultures. This chapter is an attempt to provide a conceptual framework for the comparative investigation of media policies, content, and effects in different social systems and cultures.

Communication is interaction through messages bearing man's notion of existence, priorities, values, and relationships. Codes of symbolic significance conveyed through modes of expression form the currency of social relations. Institutions package, media compose, and technologies release message systems into the mainstream of common consciousness.

A version of this chapter appeared in George Gerbner, Larry Gross, and William H. Melody (eds.), *Communications Technology and Social Policy*. New York: Wiley, 1973.

How is this massive flow managed? How does it fit into or alter the existing cultural context? What perspectives on life and the world does it express and cultivate? How does it vary across time, societies, cultures? Finally, how does the cultivation of collective assumptions relate to the conduct of public affairs, and vice versa?

The questions designate three areas of analysis.* How mass media relate to other institutions, make decisions, compose message systems, and perform their functions in society are questions for *institutional policy analysis.* How large bodies of messages can be observed as dynamic systems with symbolic functions that have social consequences is the question of *message system analysis.* What common assumptions, points of view, images, and associations do the message systems tend to cultivate in large and heterogeneous communities, and with what public policy implications, are problems for *cultivation analysis.*

THE INSTITUTIONAL POLICY PROCESS

How do media managers determine and perform the functions their institutions, clients, and the social order require? What is the overall effect of corporate controls on the basic terms of symbolic output? What policy changes, if any, do in fact alter those terms, and how?

Mass-media policies reflect not only a stage in industrial development and the general structure of social relations but also particular types of institutional and industrial powers and pressures. Mass communicators everywhere occupy sensitive and central positions in the social network. They have suppliers, distributors, and critics. Other organizations claim their attention or protection. They have associations of their own. They have laws, codes, and policies that channel and constrain them. And they have patrons who, as in any industrial production, supply the capital, the facilities, and the authority (or at least opportunity) to address mass publics.

The systematic exercise of powers resides in institutional roles and in relationships to centers of power. A scheme designed to analyze this process must identify the roles, suggest some sources of their powers, and specify those functions that affect what the media communicate. Power and its application become relevant to this scheme as they shape what is being communicated to mass-media publics. (See Table 1.)

Types of Leverage and Typical Functions

Authorities possess legal powers to enact and enforce demands or impose sanctions upon communicators. Legislative, executive, judicial bodies, regulatory

*Much of the following is drawn from my chapter "Cultural Indicators: The Third Voice" in George Gerbner, Larry P. Gross, and William H. Melody (eds.), *Communications Technology and Social Policy.* New York: Wiley, 1973.

commissions, public administrators, the police, and the military may have such authority. Authorities may assume rights patrons ordinarily have and may impose sanctions, such as for seditious or criminal acts, that patrons cannot. Authorities may also depend on the support of communicators for much of their authority; the "regulated" have been known to regulate the regulators.

Patrons are those who directly invest in or subsidize media operations in exchange for economic, political, or cultural benefits. Their clients are the media that provide such benefits in exchange for discretionary patronage. Media patrons may be banks, advertisers, other corporate or civic organizations, religious or military bodies, political parties, or governments. The principal types of patrons and the major client relationships determine the role of media management in the power scheme of every society. The client relationship also affects the institution's approach to most issues and problems and permeates the climate of communicator decision-making.

Table 1 Major Power Roles, Types of Leverage, and Typical Functions Directing the Formation of Mass-Produced Message Systems

Power Roles (Groups)	Types of Leverage	Typical Functions
1. Authorities make and enforce legally binding decisions	Political and military	Arbitrate, regulate, legitimize power relations; demand service
2. Patrons invest, subsidize	Control over resources	Set conditions for the supply of capital and operating funds
3. Management	Control over personnel	Set and supervise policies; public relations
4. Auxiliaries supplement and support management	Access to specialized services	Provide supplies, services
5. Colleagues	Solidarity	Set standards; protection
6. Competitors	Scarcity	Set standards; vigilance
7. Experts (talent, technicians, critics, subject specialists)	Skill knowledge, popularity, prestige	Provide personal, creative, performing, technical services, advice
8. Organizations	Pressure through representation, boycott, appeal to authorities	Demand favorable attention, portrayal, policy support
9. Publics (groups created or cultivated (or both) by media)	Individual patronage	Attend to messages; buy products

Management consists of executives and administrators who make up the chain of command in the organization. They formulate and supervise the implementation of policies intended to fulfill the terms of patron and other power-group support. They engage and control all personnel. Management's chief functions are to cultivate client relations and to conduct public relations. From the management's point of view, the messages that the institution produces must serve these two functions.

Auxiliaries provide supplies and services necessary to management's ability to perform its tasks. They are distributing organizations, networks, agencies, and syndicates; suppliers of raw materials, talent, artistic properties, and logistical services; wholesale and retail outlets; related manufacturing and trade concerns, associations, unions; and the holders of patents, copyrights, or other property rights.

Colleagues are communicators whose status, sense of direction or standards, and solidarity with one another can exert leverage on the formation and selection of messages.

Competitors are other professionals or media whose claims on scarce resources or ability to innovate can force the institution to exercise vigilance and either innovate or emulate to maintain its relationships with patrons and publics.

Experts possess needed personal skills, knowledge, critical abilities, or other gifts. They are writers, editors, creative talent, technicians, critics, researchers, subject matter specialists, consultants, and others who can give (or withhold) personal services necessary for communication.

Organizations are other formally structured or corporate groups who may claim attention, protection, or services. They may be business, political, religious, civic, fraternal, or professional associations. Inasmuch as some sort of public visibility has become a virtual requirement for organizational viability and support, the competition for attention is intense. Large organizational investments in public relations via the media exert pressure on media content and make media dependent on freely available (and self-serving) organizational resources.

Publics are the products of media output—groups created and cultivated through the messages. They are loose aggregations of people who may have little in common. But the symbols they share cultivate a community of meaning and perspective despite other differences. Management's task of "public relations" is to develop this sense of community into material value for the institution and its patrons.

Institutional power is exerted through the leverage built into power roles. Authorities can apply political or police pressure; patrons can provide or withdraw subsidy; managements can hire and fire; auxiliaries can work overtime or quit servicing; colleagues can strike; competitors can raid, scoop, or

corner the market; experts can refuse to serve; organizations can support, protest, or boycott; and publics can patronize or stop reading, viewing, buying, or voting.

While analytically distinct, neither power roles nor types of leverage are in reality separate and isolated. On the contrary, they often combine, overlap, and telescope in different configurations. The accumulation of power roles and possibilities of leverage give certain institutions dominant positions in the mass communication of their societies.

MESSAGE SYSTEM ANALYSIS

The most popular products of mass-produced culture provide special opportunities for the study of socially potent message systems. In these systems—popular fiction, drama, and news—aspects of life are recreated in significant associations with total human situations. An area of knowledge or the operation of a social enterprise would appear only when dramatic or news values (i.e., social symbolic functions) demand it.

The symbolic composition and structure of the message system of a mass medium defines its own synthetic "world." All that exists in that "world" is represented in it. "Facts" reflect, not opaque reality but palpable design. Focus directs attention, emphasis signifies importance, "typecasting" and fate accent value and power and the thread of action or other association ties things together into dynamic wholes. The "world" has its own time, space, geography, demography, and ethnography, bent to institutional purpose and rules of social morality. What policies populate, actions animate, fates govern, and themes dominate this "world?" How do things work in it, and why do they change from time to time? These are questions of message system analysis.

The study of a system *as system* notes processes and relationships expressed in the whole, not in its parts. Unlike literary, dramatic, or political criticism, or in fact, most personal cultural participation and judgment, message system analysis observes the record of institutional behavior in message mass-production for large and heterogeneous communities. The reliable observation of that record of institutional behavior reveals collective and common rather than individual and unique features of public image formation and cultivation.

The analysis may record topics, themes, persons, and types of action represented in the material. It may touch upon the history, geography, demography, and ethnography of the symbolic "world." The symbolic population and its interpersonal and group relationships may be observed. Themes of nature, science, politics, law, crime, business, education, art, illness and health, peace

and war, sex, love, friendship, and violence may be coded. The roles, values, and goals of the characters who populate the symbolic "world" may be related to the issues with which they grapple and to the fates to which they are destined.

Media content indicators tell us not so much what individuals think or do as what most people think or do something *about* in *common*. They will tell us about the shared representations of life, the issues, and the prevailing points of view that capture public attention, occupy people's time, and animate their imagination. They will help us understand the impact of communication media development and social change upon the symbolic climate that affects *all* we think and do.

CULTIVATION ANALYSIS

The distinctive characteristics of large groups of people are acquired in the process of growing up, learning, and living in one culture rather than another. Individuals make their own selection of materials through which to cultivate personal images, tastes, views, and preferences, and they seek to influence those available to and chosen by their children. But they cannot cultivate that which is not available. They will rarely select what is scarcely available, seldom emphasized, or infrequently presented. A culture cultivates not only patterns of conformity but also of alienation or rebellion after its own image.

The message systems of a culture not only inform but form common images. They not only entertain but create publics. They not only satisfy but shape a range of attitudes, tastes, and preferences. They provide the boundary conditions and overall patterns within which the processes of personal and group-mediated selection, interpretation, and image-formation go on.

Cultivation analysis begins with the insights of the study of institutions and the message systems they produce and goes on to investigate the contributions that these systems and their symbolic functions make to the cultivation of assumptions about life and the world.

Message systems cultivate the terms upon which they present subjects and aspects of life. There is no reason for assuming that the cultivation of these terms depends in any significant way upon agreement or disagreement with or belief or disbelief in the presentations, or upon whether these presentations are presumably factual or imaginary. This does not mean, of course, that we do not normally attach greater credibility to a news story, a presumably factual report, a trusted source, a familiar account, than to a fairy tale or to what we regard as false or inimical. It does mean that in the general process of image-formation and cultivation both "fact" and "fable" play significant and interrelated roles.

The "effects" of communications are not primarily what they make us "do" but what they contribute to the meaning of all that is done (or accepted or avoided)—a more fundamental and ultimately more decisive process. The consequences of mass communication should be sought in the relationships between mass-produced and technologically mediated message systems and the broad common terms of image cultivation in a culture. The principal "effects" of mass communications are thus to be found in the fundamental assumptions, definitions, and premises they contain and cultivate, and not necessarily in agreements or disagreements with their overt suggestions or in acting upon their specific propositions at any one time. Communication is the nutrient culture and not just the occasional medicine (or poison) of mental life. The most critical public consequences of mass communications are in defining, ordering, and presenting the issues of life and society and not just in influencing who will do what in the short run.

A culture cultivates the images of a society. The dominant communication agencies produce the message systems that cultivate the dominant image patterns. They structure the public agenda of existence, priorities, values, relationships. People use this agenda—some more selectively than others—to support their ideas, actions, or both, in ways that, on the whole, tend to match the general composition and structure of message systems (provided, of course, that there is also other environmental support for these choices and interpretations). There is significant change in the nature and functions of that process when there is change in the technology, ownership, clientele, and other institutional characteristics of dominant communication agencies.

Decisive cultural change does not occur in the symbolic sphere alone. When it occurs, it stems from a change in social relations that makes the old cultural patterns dysfunctional to the new order. In time (although not necessarily without special attention and effort) new cultural patterns restore to public communications their basic functions: the support of the new (existing) order and its adjustment to changing times.

The mass media—printing, film, radio, television—ushered in the modern world as we know it. Mass communication changed the production and distribution of knowledge. The traditional disciplines cannot fully and adequately address those problems of changing societies that require a new theoretical focus. New disciplines and new forms of inquiry emerge to confront directly what the established fields touch upon only in passing. One such new discipline is communications. It emerged largely in response to the need for assessing the dynamics of mass media in different societies and for understanding the issues and choices they pose for all societies. Large-scale international cooperative efforts are underway to study mass media in changing cultures in comparative terms, thus making critical contributions to knowledge in all participating countries. The conceptual framework presented in this chapter is intended to contribute to those efforts.