Television: continuing the story-telling tradition

Editor's Note: This is the third in a series of 15 articles exploring "Popular Culture: Mirror of American Life." In this article, George Gerbner, dean of the Annenberg School of Communications at the University of Pennsylvania, discusses the economic interre-lationships between the popular culture industries and their publics. This series was written for COURSES BY NEWSPAPER, a program developed by University Extension, Uni-versity of California, San Diego, and funded by a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities.

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Popular culture is the stories we share every day. Call it news, fiction, education, mythology, or just media, that great and uniquely human process governs much of what we do.

Who is the most prolific and tireless story-teller in your home? It used to be the parent, grandparent, or older sibling. Today in most homes it is television — by far. Television has achieved what all emperors and popes could only dream about: a pulpit in every living room, with a charismatic messenger providing the common ritual of entertainment and information with a central underlying sales message for all.

The story behind this great transformation of society is the story of how we allocate and use our popular cultural resources. Who pays for what to whom?

For most of human existence, public story telling was a handicraft process, conducted face-to-face and administered by a priestly or noble hierarchy. Payment for it was extracted in the form of tribute or tithe and justified in terms of cosmic order.

The industrial and electronic revolutions changed all that. One of the first machines — the printing press — began mechanized story-telling and cultural mass production. The Bible could now be put into the hands of ordinary people to interpret as they saw fit, paving the way to the Reformation and the secular state.

"Packaged knowledge" could now cross boundaries of status, space, and time and break the bonds of family and caste. The old hierarchy gave way to the new corporate owners and governors of industrial society. Their power rests largely in their freedom to manage the industrialized process of story telling and to build mass markets for mass production through the mass distribution of symbols and advertising messages.

Eventually advertisers replaced nobility, church, and state as the patrons of the most popular of the arts, particularly radio and television. The public's monies (included in the price of advertised goods) are channeled through them to support corporate aims, sales, and powers.

The electronic wave that gathered strength with radio hit hard with television, engulfing and changing the contours of all aspects of popular culture. The chief characteristics of television are cradle-to-grave and nearly universal coverage; centralized, standardized, and ritualized production; and nonselective use. In addition, most elements of program production are centralized so that news, fiction, drama, documentary, talk, game, and other shows serve the same basic institutional purposes.

The First Amendment to the Constitution, designed to protect the public from an oppressive state government, became the principal shield of the new "private governments" — the three major broadcasting networks and their corporate sponsors — protecting them from public (as well as government) control of programming.

'AS ADVERTISED ON TV' — Sears paint, the subject of an intensive national TV advertising campaign, is featured in a floor display. Advertising is today the chief support of popular culture.

POPULAR CULTURE
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STUDY QUESTIONS

—What was the shift in "public story-telling" detailed by Gerbner?

—What was one of the first "machines" that began mass-production of popular culture?

—In what ways can advertisers be considered the new "patrons" of the popular arts?

—Why does Gerbner consider the three television networks and their corporate sponsors to be "private governments?"

How do we pay for this?

Advertising costs, which are passed on to the American consumer, total $36 billion annually — 100 times the total gross budget of the United Nations.

Some 1,762 daily and over 7,500 weekly newspapers absorb nearly one-third of that amount. Television uses 20 per cent of the total, and its share keeps rising, gradually squeezing older media out of the business.

Radio now gets less than 7 per cent of the total advertising support and magazines less than 6, with outdoor, direct mail, and other outlets accounting for the rest.

TV programming is run by a few largely anonymous network executives who regularly assemble over 100 million Americans a day and extract from their pockets over $30 million a day to pay for the advertising that supports the programs, the agencies, the broadcasters, the television set manufacturers, the repair people, and the electricity needed to run the set.

The power of television enables it to charge an average of $100,000 per prime time commercial minute and up to a quarter of a million dollars for a one-minute commercial inserted into a movie like "Gone With the Wind" — and advertisers stand in line for the privilege.

Divided by audience size, these astronomical prices add up to an attractive "cost per thousand" (viewers) compared to other more selective — and selectively used — forms of mass communication and advertising.

Television also leads popular culture in terms of its concentration. It takes a big network to produce expensive shows and to take big risks. The top 25 network advertisers pay more than half of the three major networks' bills, with three giant soap companies alone paying some 14 per cent of the total.

The rest of the money we spend for popular culture goes for books, movies, records, and sports, all of which now depend on broadcasting for transmission or promotion or both, but most of which — unlike broadcasting itself — can also be bought directly by the consumer.

Advertising-supported media create the bulk of popular culture. But their principal products — the products they sell for profit — are not culture; they are people, called audiences and sold to advertisers for a price.

The direct price the public pays for newspapers and magazines covers the cost of delivery. The advertisers pay the rest, but from money that, if not for special legislation, would have gone to the public treasury.

In other words, the public's own money is used to sell public audiences to the highest bidders. This is done in three principal ways.

1. All broadcasting stations are licensed by the Federal Communications Commission to operate the airways in the "public interest, convenience, and necessity" according to the law. In fact, they operate as businesses to make a profit, but the enormously profitable license to broadcast in the public domain is given away free of charge.

2. The advertising subsidy that supports and guides the cultural industry is extracted through a levy on the price of all advertised goods and services. Some call this private taxation without representation. The tax is hidden in the price of soap; I pay when I wash, not when I watch TV or read a magazine.

3. Congress made advertising a tax-deductive business expense, subsidizes the postal rates of printed media, and provides certain advantages for "failing" newspapers.

Without these direct contributions from the public treasury, "private" media would not be profitable, and probably could not exist at all.

Stripped of mystification, the "new religion" and other forms of mainstream popular culture operate on legislative and market mechanisms that channel public monies to private corporations to support "cheap" or "free" media as the cultural arms of business and industry.

Since the marketing mechanism is concerned not just with popularity but with persuading large audiences to buy the goods and services advertised, the quality and diversity of the cultural service, and its relevance to the needs of many specific publics that make up the total community, cannot, therefore, be the chief criteria of most mass cultural production.

What of the future?

There are signs of tension and of pressure to loosen the hold of the corporate giants and the networks and to diversify the mainstream of popular culture, especially television. Citizen groups and public organizations are demanding greater responsiveness and protection of the public interest from all government-private as well as public.

Such broadening and democratization of popular cultural production would have the additional advantage of not selling the same fears, hopes, and styles of life to practically all of the people practically all of the time.

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Next Week: Ray B. Browne, director of the Center for Popular Culture at Bowling Green State University in Ohio, discussed the development of popular culture throughout American history.