Communication and Social Environment

Messages are the medium in which human beings exist. Precisely how human behavior and attitudes are shaped by the multifarious forms of mass communication is now beginning to be investigated

by George Gerbner

The ways in which people reflect on things and relate to one another are rooted in the human ability to compose images, produce messages and employ complex systems of symbols. A change in these processes transforms the nature of human affairs. We are in the midst of such a transformation. It stems from the mass production of symbols and messages, which represents a revolution in information and popular culture. Of all the changes in what has come to be called the quality of life, none has had a larger direct impact on human consciousness and social behavior than the rise of communication technology.

Long ago the development of writing freed memory of much of its burden and shifted control over the accumulation of knowledge from storytellers to makers and keepers of records. The spread of literacy broke that monopoly and prepared the ground for the mobility of ideas and people that is so important in modern industry. Printing sped ideas and commands to all who could read. Today satellites fly and spy overhead, and we are wired together so tightly that a short circuit can fry us all. A "hot line" is needed to make sure that if humankind seems about to exterminate itself, the deed is purposeful rather than the result of error. When most people can be exposed to the same sources of power at the same time, the shape and pace of history have changed.

The Scottish patriot Andrew Fletcher once said: "If a man were permitted to write all the ballads, he need not care who should make the laws of the nation." The mass production of all the ballads is at the heart of the cultural transformation now in progress. The ballads of an age are powerful myths depicting its visions of the invisible forces of life, society and the universe. They are blends of fact and fiction designed to reveal how things are or ought to be. They compel attention for their own sake. They inform as they entertain. They make entertainment—the celebration of conventional morality—the only collective drill in which most members of a culture engage with pleasure. Today's popular entertainment in news, drama and fiction has become the universal source of public acculturation.

Developments in communication not only have extended the human ability to exchange messages but also have transformed the symbolic environment of human consciousness and are continuing to alter it. Perhaps the most profound human dilemma is this: Just as knowledge can be said to confer power, so power generates and uses knowledge for its own purposes. Social and institutional structures (the Government, the broadcasting networks, the publishing houses and the educational institutions) have a steadily increasing role in shaping the symbolic environment.

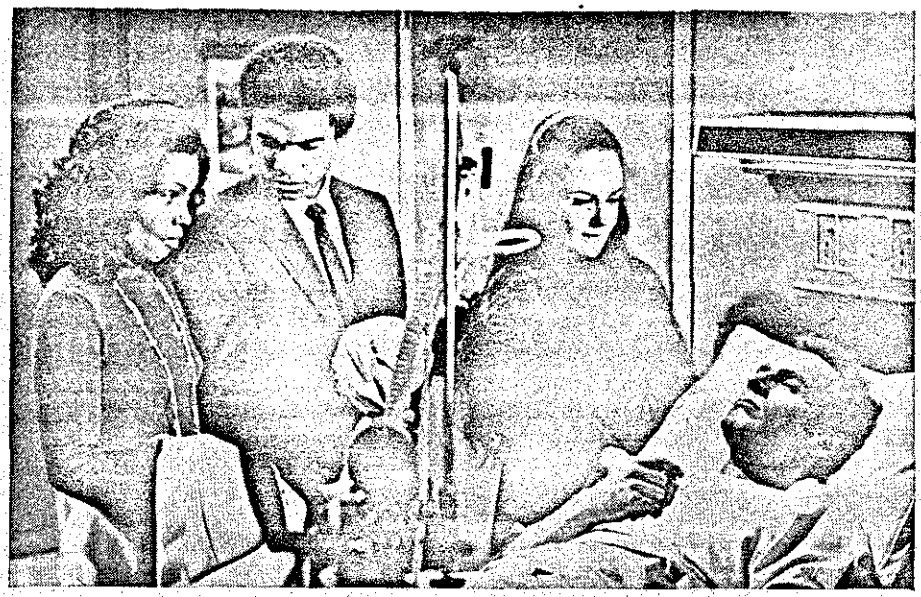
Self-government can no longer be supposed to follow from the assumption that the press and other communication agencies are free. In a highly centralized mass-production structure of the kind characterizing modern communication, "freedom" is the right of the managers of the media to decide what the public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

The simplest organisms take energy from their immediate surroundings. They need little information except what is contained in a fixed hereditary code. Higher organisms have specialized senses to receive information and complex brains to process and store it. They can reach out, search a larger area, pick up signals from a distance, accumulate impressions over a period of time, relate to one another, assume different roles and engage in behavior based on a sharing of learned significance. Only man, however, acts primarily in terms of symbol systems.

Symbolic context gives an act its human significance. Meanings do not reside within people any more than breathing resides only in the lungs. Meanings are the product of an exchange between the brain and the symbolic environment, which is to the brain what air is to the lungs. The exchange is the reason one can say that although all organisms behave, only humans act. Action is behavior that derives its distinctively human meaning from the symbolic context in which it is embedded or to which it is related.

The exchange by means of the symbolic environment is what I define as communication. It is interaction through messages. Even when people interact face to face, they usually do it partly or wholly through the patterned exchange of messages. By messages I mean formally coded symbolic or representational patterns of some shared significance

TELEVISION CONTROL ROOM is one of many linkages in the complex system that creates the communicative environment of the U.S. The control room on the opposite page is one of those operated by the Columbia Broadcasting System in New York. When a "live" program is being broadcast, the monitor screens show what each one of several cameras is picking up. The director can cut from one camera to another to synthesize the program.



DRAMATIC SCENES from television programs and motion pictures are employed by the author's group at the Annenberg School of Communications of the University of Pennsylvania to test the influence of the media on the perceptions that viewers form of people, life and society. Pictures such as these are shown without identification to respondents, who are asked such questions as what the characters are saying, what might happen next and whether the characters are strangers or people who have known each other for some time.

in a culture. Indeed, culture itself can be regarded broadly as a system in which messages cultivate and regulate the relations between people. In one form or another such processes appear in all types of life and in all social systems, but it is in human culture and in the conduct of human life and society that communication plays its most complex and distinctive part.

Even the most primitive peoples have employed shapes and images for symbolic and representational purposes and have erected imposing symbolic structures of religion, statecraft and play. Through communication they have performed elaborate rituals, observed intricate kinship systems and conducted the affairs of the tribe or nation. Today systems of messages that can be recorded and widely transported enable man to bridge vast reaches of space and time and to cultivate values of collective survival. They also facilitate spasms of mass destruction, a distinctively human trait.

A change in the relation of people to the common culture marks the transition from one epoch to another in the way that members of our species are "humanized." The increasing rate of this change and the lengthening span of life mean that different generations living side by side can now be humanized in different ways, so that they live in essentially different (but overlapping) cultural epochs. Distant storytellers mass-produce new tales steadily and can tell them to millions of children, parents and grandparents simultaneously. As a result the traditional process of socialization has been altered. Never before have so many people in so many places shared so much of a common system of messages and images—and the assumptions about life, society and the world that the system embodies—while having so little to do with creating the system. In sum, the fabric of popular culture that relates the elements of existence to one another and shapes the common consciousness of what is, what is important, what is right and what is related to what else is now largely a manufactured product.

The experiments in self-government that brought to an end the era of absolute monarchs were based on a new conception of popular culture, namely that reason confronts reality on terms made available by the culture. It was thought that popular self-government consisted in citizens' collectively creating alternatives of policy rather than simply responding to them. A great deal

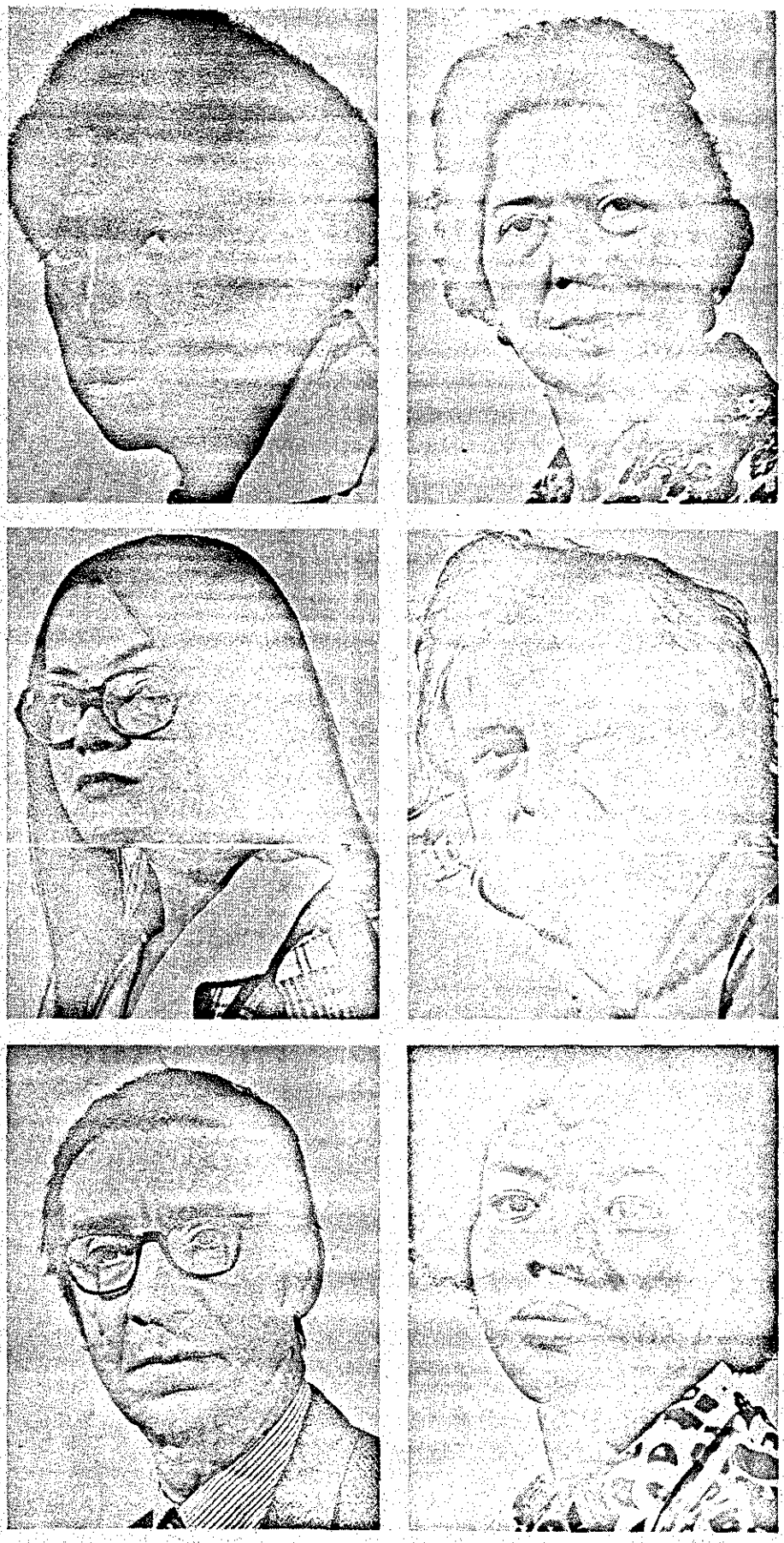
has happened since these assumptions found expression in revolutionary documents of societies at a time when public communications were mostly handcrafted by individuals speaking for diverse publics. Now that public communications have become commodities manufactured by powerful agencies of the industrial society for sale to heterogeneous audiences, the perspective of the communications reflects institutional organization and control.

The organs of mass communication—printing, television and radio—provide the means of selecting, recording, viewing and sharing man's notions of what is, what is important, what is right and what is related to what else. The media are the cultural arms of the industrial order from which they spring. They bring into existence and then cultivate a new form of common consciousness: modern mass publics.

The significance of mass communication does not stem from the numbers of people involved. Large groups of people were reached by other forms of communication long before the advent of the modern forms. The modern concept of masses is groups so large and dispersed that only methods of mass production and distribution can reach them with the same message in a short period of time. The significance of the mass media therefore lies in their ability to mass-produce messages that create mass publics: heterogeneous social aggregates that never meet face to face and may have nothing in common except the messages they share. The biggest of the mass media form the only common bond among all the groups in an otherwise fragmented society. As an official of a broadcast network said recently, television is "the only mass entertainment and information medium that does not disfranchise the rural and urban poor." They are therefore the first poor people in history who share much of the culture of the rich, designed by and for the more affluent—a function that only the church served in earlier times.

Such "public-making" is the chief instrument of modern social cohesion. When rebels take over a radio station or candidates demand equal time or advertisers buy space or time, what is fought for or bought is not time or space but the chief product of the modern media: access to the publics they have created.

These publics are maintained through continued publication, by which I mean the output of all the organs of mass communication. The publics are supplied



STANDARD PHOTOGRAPHS, which are of people at the University of Pennsylvania, are also shown in tests of the influence of the mass media. Respondents are asked such questions as which person is probably not American, who is most likely to be friendly with whom and who would win if *X* got into a fight with *Y*. The answers of viewers of different television programs or different types of motion picture are compared with one another and with those of nonviewers to determine the effects of types of content on perceptions.

with selections of information and entertainment that are regarded by the selectors as important in terms of the perspectives to be cultivated. Publication therefore is the selection of shared ways of viewing events and aspects of life.

Publication is thus the basis of community consciousness among diverse groups of people too numerous or dispersed to interact face to face or in any other personally mediated way. The great significance of publication is its ability to form new bases for collective thought and action quickly, continuously and pervasively across boundaries of time, space and class. That is why the organs of public communication have a special place in all modern states, which through legal or economic mechanisms confer the right to control large presses, motion-picture and television studios and postal and wireless communications on government agencies or on private holders of licenses, patents, franchises or properties.

Selectivity and control, which are inherent in any communication, dominate the mass-communication process. The right to acculturate a nation and to shape the public agenda has never been open to all; it is one of the most carefully guarded powers in any society. The real question is not whether the organs of mass communication are free but rather: By whom, how, for what purposes and with what consequences are the inevitable controls exercised?

A few programs of research in mass communication, mostly affiliated with the universities, have begun to ask this question. The development is fairly recent. Until the late 1950's such research was under the influence of the marketplace. The methods of the behavioral sciences were applied mainly in an attempt to control, influence or manipulate behavior on behalf of clients rather than to understand communication as a crucial element of the social environment.

For more than 40 years various governmental and private bodies have called for some kind of surveillance of the organs of mass communication. None of the proposals, however, specified how the surveillance might be done or limited the scope to manageable proportions. As a result there is probably no area of important social policy in which far-reaching decisions are made with as little reliable, systematic, cumulative and comparable information about trends and the state of affairs as the area of the mass production and distribution of the most broadly shared messages of our culture. Little is known about trends in the composition and structure of the mass-produced systems of messages that define life in urbanized societies, and no more is known about the institutional processes that compose and structure those systems. Much of the standard research on how people respond in various situations lacks insight into the dynamics of the common cultural context.

Other reasons can be cited for pursuing the university-based programs of research in communication. One is to look for evidence of cultural trends. Citizens concerned with such issues as health, education, delinquency, aging, generational conflict, drugs and violence often point to cultural "trends" to support their case, but there is no convincing evidence to support any case.

Moreover, educators wonder increasingly about the consequences inherent in the commercial compulsion to present life in salable packages. Corporate, technological and other processes of producing messages short-circuit former networks of social communication and superimpose their own forms of collective consciousness—their own publics—on other social relations, harnessing acculturation to consumer markets. The new programs of academic research in mass communication are designed to monitor the elements of the system of generating and using bodies of broadly shared messages that are most relevant to social issues and to issues of public policy.

Much of what I say about these research programs is based on my own work, first at the University of Illinois and later at the University of Pennsylvania. My colleagues and I have studied such subjects as popular conceptions of mental illness; ideological perspectives inherent in news reporting; the portrayal of teachers, schools and education in the mass-produced cultures of several countries; the image of the film hero in American and foreign movies, and the social functions of symbolic violence as presented in television drama. With these studies we have developed the areas and terms of analysis for examining modern communication.

I have defined communication as interaction through messages bearing man's notions of existence, priorities, values and relations. Codes of symbolic significance conveyed through modes of expression form the currency of social relations. Institutions package, media compose and technologies distribute message systems to heterogeneous mass publics.

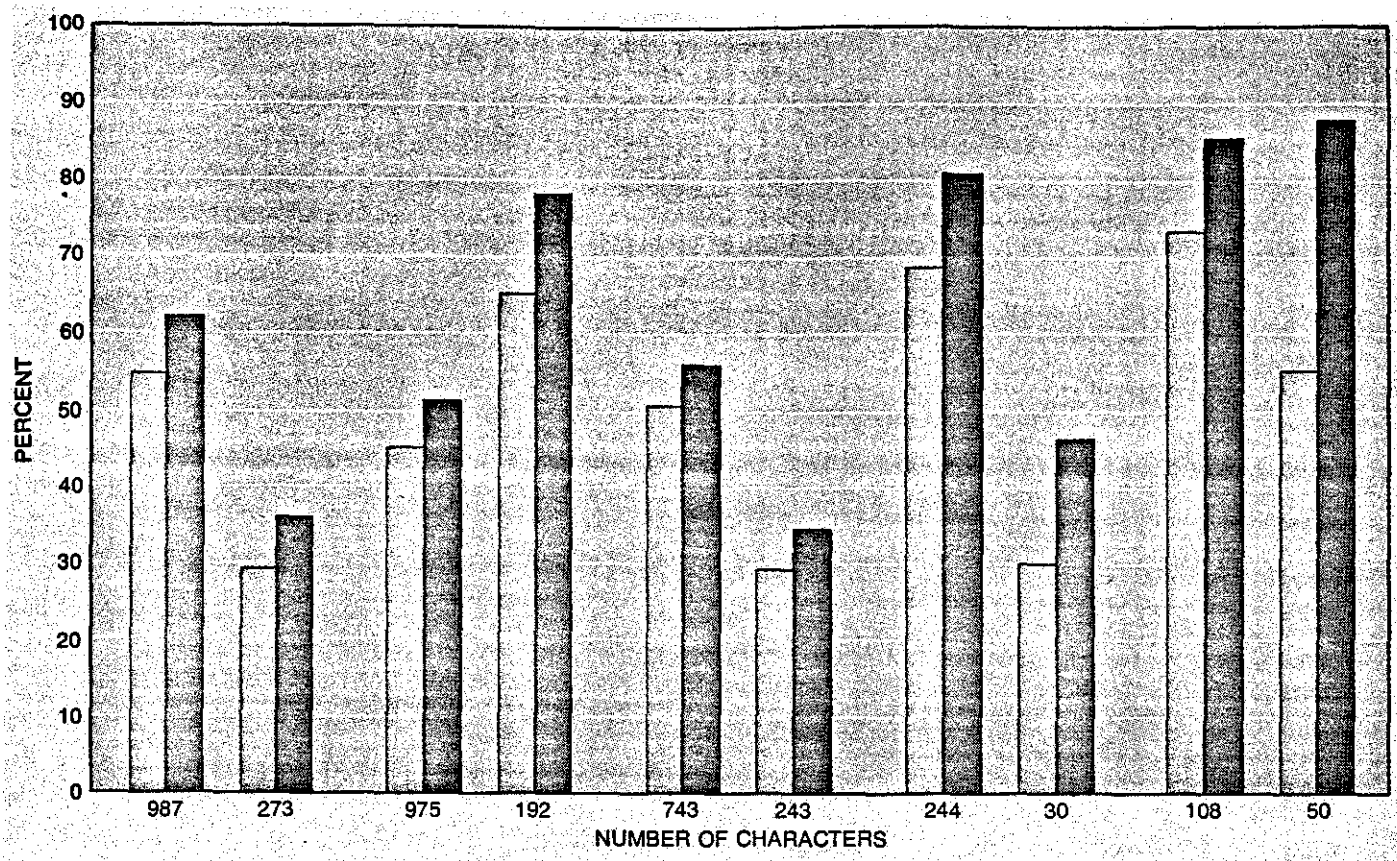
How is this massive flow managed? How does it fit into or alter the existing cultural context? What perspectives on life and the world does it express and cultivate? How does it vary across times, societies and cultures? How does its cultivation of collective assumptions relate to the conduct of public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

The questions suggest three areas of analysis: institutional processes, message systems and cultivation. The first area involves questions of how the organs of mass communication make decisions, compose message systems and relate to other institutions. In examining message systems one asks how large bodies of messages can be observed as dynamic systems with symbolic functions that have social consequences. Cultivation analysis asks what common assumptions, points of view, images and associations the message systems tend to cultivate in large and heterogeneous communities and what the implications are for public policy.

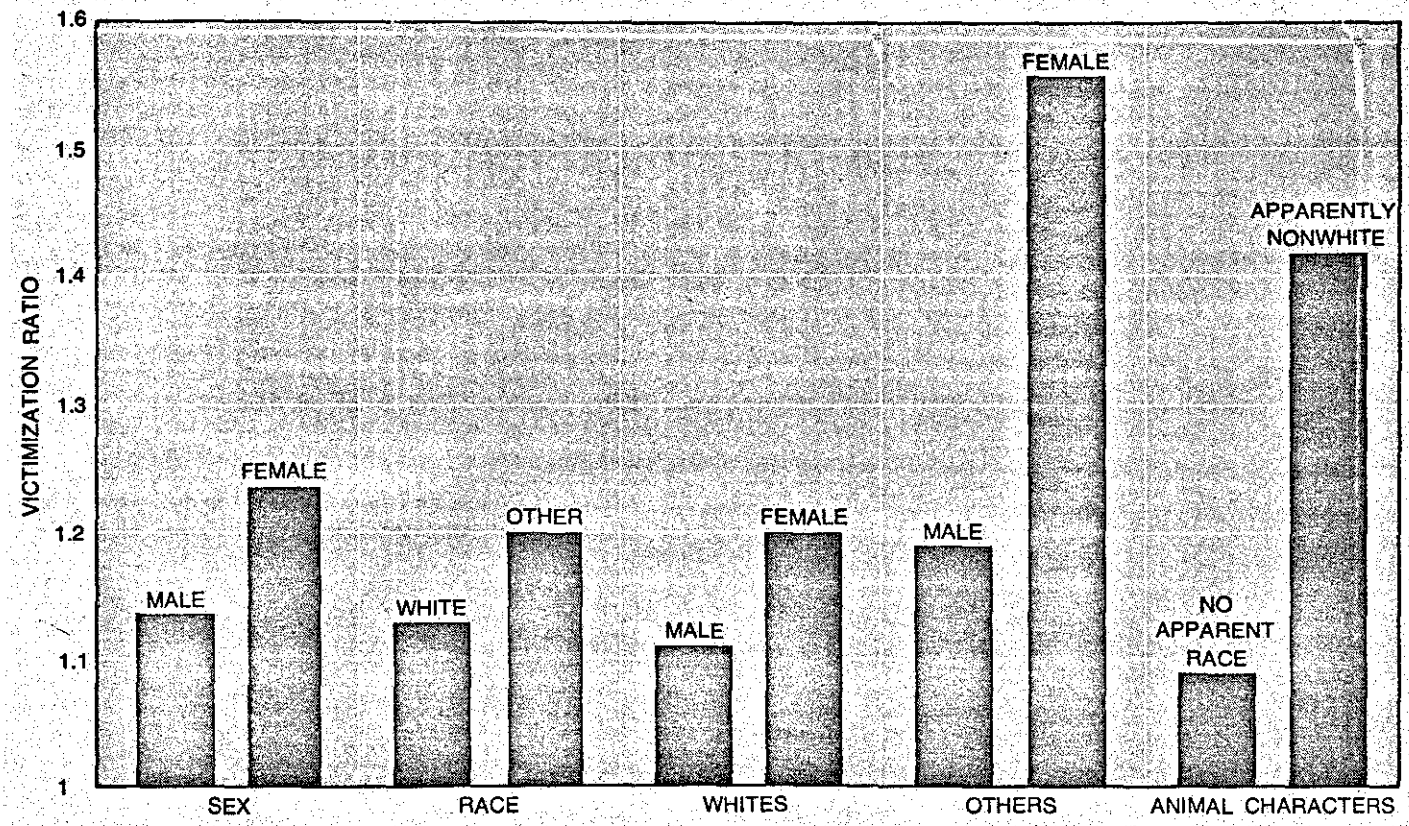
Every decision to communicate certain things is at the same time a decision to suppress other things. What comes out is a result of competitive pressure breaking through structured inhibitions. When only a fragment of all available and plausible messages can be selected for transmission, an analysis cannot realistically focus on whether or not suppression is involved but must consider the question of what systems of pressures and inhibitions determine the patterns of selection by communicators.

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 symbolic output? What policy changes do in fact alter that output and how? These are the main questions for the analysis of institutional processes.

The policies of the mass media reflect not only a stage in industrial development and the general structure of social relations but also particular types of institutional powers and pressures. Mass communicators everywhere occupy sensitive and central positions in the social network. The groups that have a stake in shaping content and influence or power over it include the authorities who issue licenses and administer the laws; the patrons who invest in or subsidize the operation; organizations, institutions and loose aggregations of publics that require attention and cultivation; the managements that set policies and supervise operations; the auxiliary groups that provide services, raw materials and



VIOLENCE AND VICTIMIZATION of leading characters in television drama are charted according to type and whether the character committed violence (*color*) or suffered it (*black*). The survey found victimization to be always more frequent than aggression. Each pair of bars represents the type of character identified in the corresponding single bars in illustration at bottom of page.



TELEVISION VIOLENCE is charted on the basis of an analysis of dramatic programs on the networks in the evening and on Saturday morning from 1967 to 1971. The bars show the type of victim and the ratio of victims per violent character. The author's group made the study in examining the social symbolism portrayed on television and its relation to real-life attitudes. The findings revealed a "pecking order" in which white males and animal characters of no apparent race were least likely to be victimized when they were involved in violence and nonwhite females and animal characters judged to represent nonwhites were most likely to be victimized.

protection; the creative talent, experts and technicians who actually form the symbolic content and transmit the signals, and the colleagues and competitors whose solidarity or innovation helps to set standards and maintain vigilance.

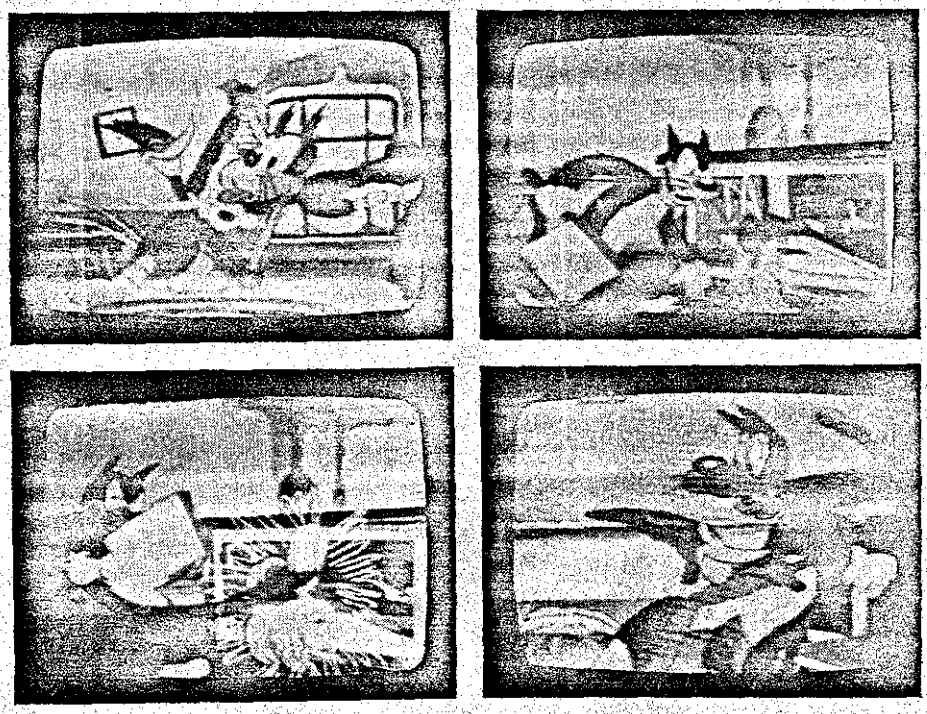
Our studies suggest that any message system produced by an institutional source has certain ideological orientations implicit in selection, emphasis and treatment. Other researchers have found that most newsmen respond more to the pressures and expectations of the newsroom than to any generalized concept of audience or public interest. One study of newsroom decisions concluded that three out of four publishers are active in directing news decisions, with their influence greatest in news of the immediate market area and in subjects that affect the revenue of the paper.

Our recent survey of how the content of television programs is regulated concludes, with regard to dramatic programming: "In a fictional world governed by the economics of the assembly line and the 'production values' of optimum appeal at least cost, symbolic action follows conventional rules of social morality. The requirements of wide acceptability and a suitable environment for the sponsor's message assure general adherence to consumer values and to common notions of justice and fair play. The issue is rarely in doubt; the action is typically a game of skill and power."

Intellectuals who assume that television can commit substantial resources to high-risk cultural productions have been talking past the issue. The basic role of television—the most massive communication medium of modern society—is to provide the symbolic functions formerly performed only by popular religions. The highly predictable scenarios of news, fiction, drama and "intimate" conversation watched by millions can easily pass for the rituals, cults, passion plays and myths of modern life.

Studies of the occupations in communication suggest that they may represent anachronistically upper-class standards of quality and autonomy, particularly in the news area. With new technological developments there may come such a proliferation and fragmentation of channels that the communication professional may give way to even more direct control by the business office and to a kind of populist commercialism that can be most easily programmed by technicians.

I turn now to the analysis of message systems, which observes the record of institutional behavior in mass-producing messages for entire communities. The observation reveals collective and common rather than individual and unique features of the process of forming and cultivating public images.



CARTOON SERIES shown on television indicates the violence that characterizes many cartoon programs. The photographs, which depict two anthropomorphic animals trying to stuff each other into an oven, are from a tape made by the Pennsylvania research group during a commercial television program. The group is exploring the hypothesis that fantasy figures and remote settings facilitate assimilation of messages that real settings may inhibit.

Our program of research in this area rests on two assumptions, one of which is that communication is the environment of social behavior rather than just specific acts, utterances and campaigns. The most profound effects of communication can be found not in making sales, getting votes, influencing opinions and changing attitudes but in the selective maintenance of relatively stable structures of images and associations that stem from institutional structures and policies and that define the common perspectives of a society. The difficulty (often failure) of any campaign designed to change views or attitudes indicates how powerful the currents that cultivate the prevailing outlooks are. Without knowing what these currents are, what they cultivate and how they change, neither social behavior nor public attitudes can be fully understood.

Our second assumption is that just as the effects of communication cannot be limited to specific messages or to attempts to change or control behavior, so the effects are not necessarily available to the conscious scrutiny of any of the parties involved in the communication. One always communicates more things—or other things—than one is aware of. Indeed, there are no failures of communication, only failures of intention and of understanding of what the message was in the first place. Many breakdowns in social and personal communication result because the recipient gets the message better and more accurately than the sender realizes and thus turns the sender and his message off.

Symbolic functions are the consequences that flow from a communication, regardless of intentions and pretensions. To investigate these functions one must analyze the symbolic environment and particular configurations of symbols in it. In this way one can obtain information about what the actual messages, rather than the presumed messages, might be. The next step is to form a hypothesis about what conceptions the particular symbolic functions might cultivate in an exchange with particular communicating parties. The human and social consequences of the communication can be explored by investigating the contributions that the symbolic functions and their cultivation of particular notions might make to thinking and behavior. These contributions are usually of a cultivating and reinforcing kind; that is what culture does.

Cultures also change, however, and from time to time real shifts in perspective become possible. Herein lies

the subject matter of the analysis of cultivation.

The most distinctive characteristics of large groups of people are acquired through living in one culture rather than another. Individuals make their own selection of materials for cultivating personal images, tastes, views and preferences, and they seek to influence the materials available to their children. They cannot, however, cultivate what is not available, and they will seldom select what is scarcely available or not much emphasized. A culture cultivates not only patterns of conformity but also patterns of alienation and rebellion. The culture's affirmations pose the issues most likely to be the targets of symbolic provocation or protest.

The dominant agencies of communication produce the message systems that cultivate the dominant image patterns. They structure the public agenda of existence, priorities, values and relations. People use this agenda (some more selectively than others) to support their ideas and actions 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.

A significant change in this process takes place with a change in the technology, ownership, clientele or other institutional characteristics of the dominant communication agencies. Decisive cultural change does not occur in the symbolic field alone. When it occurs, it stems from a change in social relations that puts the old symbolic patterns out of step with the new order. In such a case the relative meanings and functions of the existing images and practices change before the images and practices themselves change. When the new cultural patterns are developed, they restore to public communication its basic function: the support and maintenance of the new order.

Cultivation analysis begins with the insights derived from the analyses of institutions and message systems. It goes on to investigate the contributions these systems and their symbolic functions make to the cultivation of common assumptions about life and the world. The study does not pay much attention to style of expression, quality of representation, artistic excellence or the nature of the individual's experience with mass culture. It focuses instead on the functions that large systems of messages perform regardless of what people think of them.

The main approaches taken in culti-

vation analysis are projective techniques (wherein respondents are presented with situations that tend to lead them to reveal views, expectations and values they may not be conscious of or might not talk about if they were asked directly), interviews in depth and periodic surveys of sample groups. We work with panels of adults and children. In all these activities the aim is to see how exposure to the mass media has influenced the thinking of the respondents about selected issues and aspects of real life.

Two areas are of particular concern in this study. One is the impact of television, since for most people television *is* culture. The other is the cultivation of social concepts among children, since the social symbolic patterns established in childhood are the ones most easily cultivated throughout life.

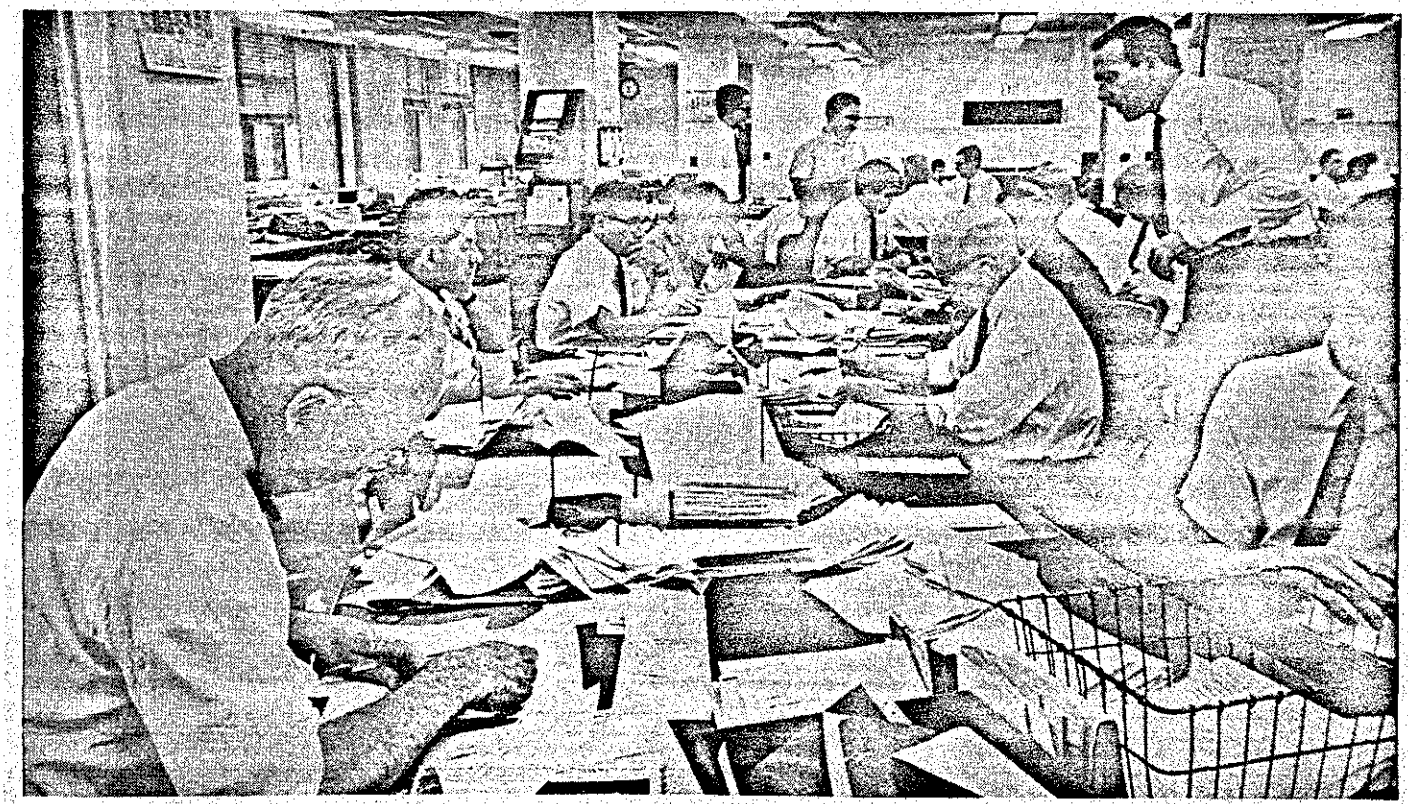
The cultural transformation resulting from mass communication has created societies whose parts increasingly relate to one another through distant communication. The more complex, specialized, extended and interrelated a system becomes, the more information it needs (and generates) to maintain stability. Moreover, self-governing social systems of high specialization and complexity require indicators that measure the trend of events in the intricate society. In recent years the effort to find such social indicators has gained momentum with the increasing speed of technological change, of which the developments in the space program are an example. The indicators would provide the society with information about its changing state while its methods of generating and using information are themselves being altered. When the symbolic environment is changing, the nature of social behavior and the usefulness of information relating to social policy can best be assessed if cultural winds and tides can be measured.

My colleague Larry P. Gross and I have recently launched a program at the University of Pennsylvania to collect and report such information. The program, which is sponsored on a pilot basis by the National Institute of Mental Health, is called Cultural Indicators. For the first time it will relate a long-term analysis of message systems (mostly television) to research on symbolic functions and how they cultivate popular notions about people and life.

Cultural indicators will trace people, topics and types of action represented in mass-produced cultures. They will touch on the history, geography, demography and ethnography of the symbolic worlds. The symbolic populations and their interpersonal and group relations will be observed. Themes of nature, science, politics, law, crime, business, education, art, health, peace, sex, love and friendship as well as violence will be noted. The roles, values and goals of the characters who populate the symbolic worlds will be related to the issues with which they grapple and to the fates to which they are destined.

We are developing tests of imagery to indicate the nature and extent of the contributions these elements of content and symbolic function make to the development and cultivation of basic concepts about people and life. Amid the clamor of commercial and political interests it may be helpful to have the third voice of social scientific inquiry keep a score of the functional significance of the deeper messages and points of view that capture public attention, occupy more time than any other activity and animate the collective imagination.

The inquiry will be the first step toward creating the conditions of cultural self-consciousness in the new symbolic environment. If it succeeds, it will help people to understand the impact of communication technology on the symbolic climate that affects all they think and do. We can then inquire into the institutional aspects of policy with a sharper awareness of the currents that tug at us all.



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