TELEVISION: The New State Religion?

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BOTH CLASSICAL electoral and classical Marxist theories of government are based on assumptions rooted in cultural developments of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. These developments also gave rise to mass communications and eventually to research on mass communications. In the past few decades, however, rapidly accumulating changes brought about a profound transformation of the cultural conditions on which modern theories of government and of mass communications rest. That change presents an historic challenge to these theories and to scientific workers concerned with these theories. I would like to sketch the nature of that challenge and to make a few tentative suggestions about the tasks ahead.

Human consciousness seems to differ from that of other animals chiefly in that humans experience reality in a symbolic context. Human consciousness is a fabric of images and messages drawn from those towering symbolic structures of a culture that express and regulate the relationships of a social system. When those relationships change, sooner or later the cultural patterns also change to express and maintain the new social order.

For most of humankind's existence, these systems of society and culture changed very slowly and usually under the impact of a collapse or invasion. The long-enduring, face-to-face, pre-industrial, preliterate cultural patterns, relatively isolated from each other, encompassed most of the story-telling, and the rituals, art, science, statecraft, and celebrations of the tribe or larger community. They explained over and over again the nature of the universe and the meaning of life. Their repetitive patterns, memorized incantations, popular

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sayings, and stories demonstrated the values, roles, productive tasks, and power relationships of society. Children were born into them, old men and women died to their ministrations, and both rulers and the ruled acted out their respective roles according to their tenets. These organically integrated symbolic patterns permeated the life space of every member of the community. Non-selective participation of all in the same symbolic world generated mistrust of strangers, the quest for security through protection by the powerful, and a sense of apprehension of and resistance to change. Conflicts of interest were submerged and dissent suppressed in the interests of what to most people seemed to be the only possible design for life.

All of this changed when the industrial revolution altered the contours of power and the structure of society. The extension of mass production into symbol-making correspondingly altered the symbolic context of consciousness and created cultural conditions necessary for the rise of modern theories of government.

One of the first industrial products was the printed book. Printing made it possible to relieve memory of its formula-bound burdens and opened the way to the endless accumulation of information and innovation. "Packaged knowledge" (the Book) could be given directly to individuals, bypassing its previously all-powerful dispensers, and could cross the old boundaries of status and community. Images and messages could now be used *selectively*. They could be chosen to express and advance individual and group interests. Printed stories—broadsides, crime and news, mercantile intelligence, romantic novels—could now speak selectively to different groups in the population and explain the newly differentiated social relationships which emerged from the industrial revolution. Print made it possible for the newly differentiated consciousness to spread beyond the limiting confines of face-to-face communication. Selectivity of symbolic participation was the prerequisite to the differentiation of consciousness among class and other interest groups within large and heterogeneous societies.

Publics are created and maintained through *publication*. Electoral theories of government are predicated upon the assumption of cultural conditions in which each public can produce and select information suited to the advancement of its own interests. Representatives of those interests are then supposed to formulate laws and administer policies that orchestrate different group interests on behalf of society as a whole.

Marxist-Leninist theories of government similarly (albeit more implicitly) assume cultural conditions that permit selectivity of symbolic production and participation, and thus differentiation of consciousness along class lines. Lenin's characterization of the press as collective organizer and mobilizer assumes (not unlike advertisers do in

capitalist countries) that the major mass media are the cultural organs of the groups that own and operate (or sponsor) them. Only in that way could working class organizations (or business corporations) produce ideologically coherent and autonomous symbol systems for their publics.

Before these theories of government came to full fruition, the cultural conditions upon which they were explicitly or implicitly based began to change. Private corporate organizations grew to the size and power of many governments. The increasingly massive mass media became their cultural arms and the First Amendment their shield. Commercial pressures made the service of many small, poor, or dissenting publics impractical. Public relations replaced the autonomous aggregation of many publics. Public opinion became the published opinions of cross-sections of atomized individuals rather than a differentiated mosaic reflecting the composite of organized publics, each conscious of its own interest.

In the young socialist countries and People's Democracies, mass media became centralized organs of revolutionary establishments. Their governing responsibilities made it difficult to cultivate a distinctly working class consciousness and to institutionalize the critical functions of the press.

These problems and difficulties arose under essentially print-based cultural conditions. But in the past few decades even those conditions began to change.

The harbinger of that change is television. The special characteristics of television set it apart from other mass media to such an extent that it is misleading to think of it in the same terms or to research it in the same terms. Furthermore, these special characteristics are only the forerunners of the prospect of an all-electronic organically composed and orchestrated total symbolic environment.

What are these special characteristics of television? My observations are based primarily on our research and experience in the United States. We do not yet know to what extent they are applicable to other countries. (That, I think, should be an early task for communications research to discover.)

1. Television consumes more time and attention of more people than all other media and leisure time activities combined. The television set is on for six hours and fifteen minutes a day in the average American home, and its sounds and images now fill the living space and symbolic world of most Americans.

2. Unlike the other media, you do not have to wait for, plan for, go out to, or seek out television. It comes to you directly at home and is there all the time. It has become a member of the family, telling its

stories patiently, compellingly, untiringly. Few parents, teachers, or priests can compete with its vivid demonstrations of what people of all kinds are like and how society works.

3. Just as television requires no mobility, it requires no literacy. In fact, it shows and tells about the world to the less educated and the non-reader—those who have never before shared the culture of the literate—with special authority and force. Television now informs most people in the United States—many of its viewers simply do not read—and much of its information comes from what is called entertainment. As in ancient times of great rituals, festivals, and circuses, the information-poor are again royally entertained by the organic symbolic patterns informing those who do not seek information.
4. These organic patterns have to be seen—and analyzed—as total systems. The content differentiations of the print era, where there were sharp distinctions between information (news) and entertainment (drama, etc.) or fiction and documentary or other genres, no longer apply. Besides, viewers typically select not programs but hours of the day and watch whatever is on during those hours. Unlike books, newspapers, magazines, or movies, television's content and effects do not depend on individually crafted and selected works, stories, etc. Assembly-line production fills total programming formulas whose structure encompasses all groups but serves one overall perspective. Story-telling (drama and legendary) is at the heart of this—as of any other—symbol system. "Real-life" demonstrations of the same value structure, as in television news, provide verisimilitude and "documentary" confirmation to the mythological world of television. All types of programming within the program structure complement and reinforce one another. It makes no sense to study the content or impact of one type of program in isolation from the others. The same viewers watch them all; the total system as a whole is absorbed into the mainstream of common consciousness.
5. For the first time since the pre-industrial age, or perhaps in all of history, there is little age-grading or separation of the symbolic materials that socialize members into the community. Television is truly a cradle-to-grave experience. Infants are born into a television home and learn from its sounds and images before they can speak, let alone read. By the time they reach school age they will have spent more hours with television than they would spend in a college classroom. At the far end of the life cycle, old people, and most institutionalized populations, are almost totally dependent on television for regular "human" contact and engagement in the larger world. Only a minority of children and older age groups watch the

few programs (none in "prime time") especially designed for them. Unlike other media, television tells its stories to children, parents, and grandparents, all at the same time.

6. Television is essentially in the business of assembling heterogeneous audiences and selling their time to advertisers or other institutional sponsors. The audiences include all age, sex, ethnic, racial, and other interest groups. They are all exposed to the same repetitive messages conveying the largest common denominator of values and conduct in society. Minority groups see their own image shaped by the dominant interests of the larger culture. This means the dissolution of the concept of autonomous publics and of any authentic group or class consciousness. Television provides an organically related synthetic symbolic structure which once again presents a total world of meanings for all. It is related to the State as only the church was in ancient times.

All this adds up to a non-selectively used cultural pattern which can no longer serve the tasks of cultivating selective and differentiated group, class, or other public consciousness. The pattern is formula-bound, ritualistic, repetitive. It thrives on novelty but is resistant to change, and it cultivates resistance to change. In that, too, television's social symbolic functions resemble pre-industrial religions more than they do the media that preceded it. The process has tremendous popular mobilizing power which holds the least informed and least educated most in its spell. Results of our research (reported under the title "Living With Television: The Violence Profile" in the Spring 1976 issue of the *Journal of Communication*) indicate that television viewing tends to cultivate its own particular outlook on social reality even among the well educated and traditionally "elite" groups.

Heavy viewers of television are more apprehensive, anxious, and mistrustful of others than light viewers in the same age, sex, and educational groups. The fear that viewing American television seems to generate, the consequent quest for security and protection by the authorities, the effective dissolution of autonomous publics, and the ease with which credible threats and scares can be used (or provoked) to justify almost any policy create a fundamentally new cultural situation. The new conditions of synthetic consciousness-making pose new problems, difficulties, and challenges for those who wish to realistically analyze or guide public understanding of society.

Researchers and scholars of communication and culture should now devote major attention to long-range cross-cultural comparative media studies that investigate the policies, processes, and consequences of the mass-production of major symbol systems in light of the respective structures and aims of different social systems. Do media really do

what they are designed to do according to the theories governing (or used to explain) the societies in which they exist? What are the differences and similarities among them? What are the cultural and human consequences of the international exchange of media materials? What are the effects of changing cultural, technological, and institutional conditions upon the social functions of media, particularly television? What are the new organizational, professional, artistic, and educational requirements for the effective fulfillment of societal goals in different cultural and social systems? And, finally, how can liberation from the age-old bonds of humankind lead to cultural conditions that enrich rather than limit visions of further options and possibilities?

These are broad and difficult tasks but we can at least begin to tackle them. Much depends on the success of the effort.