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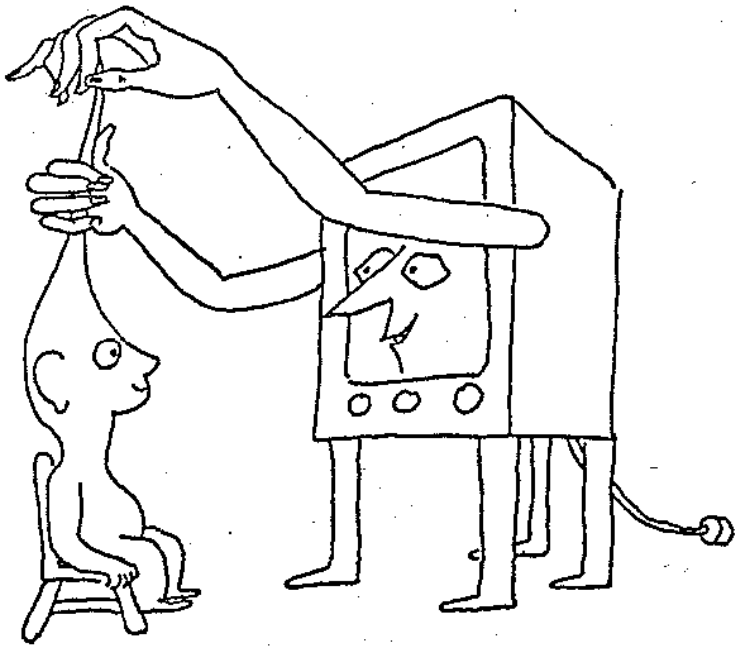

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TELEVISION'S POPULIST BREW: The Three Bs

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TELEVISION HAS TAKEN the place of the medieval church in the historic nexus of power. Today it is not church and state but television and state that govern in an uneasy relationship of mutual dependence and tension. (See my article entitled "Television: The New State Religion?" in *Et cetera* [1].)

Television has also replaced political parties as the chief means of communication between leaders and voters. The most important task of political parties today is to raise money for television and produce conventions and campaigns that fit the requirements of television.

The sea-change that television is to politics goes deeper than votes. Its tide washes over familiar labels, blurs traditional orientations, shifts the way people define themselves politically, and stirs up the old melting pot. Tens of millions of people who have been scattered, provincial, and both culturally and politically distant from the centers of activity, including those who have never read much or shared much of a common culture, are now communing with the rich

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and famous via television an average of 7½ hours a day. Television brought the previously disfranchised into a new cultural mainstream in which viewers of all groups, including the least and most priviledged, live and learn. All absorb the same information, including those who seek no information and most of that comes from what is called entertainment. The dreams of kings, emperors, and popes—an ever-glowing pulpit and faithful messenger in every home—have come true.

Television blurs political differences, blends otherwise divergent social orientations into its own broad mainstream, and bends the current in the direction of its own institutional interests. One product of that process is the political brew I call the New Populism. To understand its dynamics we first need to consider the mechanism of "mainstreaming;" second, the programs and characters that define the television mainstream; and third, the political self-definitions the mainstream cultivates in different groups of viewers.

We analyzed patterns of responses to many questions about life and politics in surveys of male and female, young and old, nonwhite and white, rich and poor, uneducated and highly educated and other social groups. We have found that many traditional distinctions of thinking and action exist mostly among the light viewers of these groups. The heavy viewers tend to reflect a relative commonality or convergence toward the conception of the world as presented on television. That is mainstreaming.

When millions of dollars of revenue ride on every rating point, program producers have little choice but to construct a symbolic world of the broadest possible sales-appeal at the least cost. The compulsion to present life in saleable packages shapes the world best known to most Americans. That is the world of the television mainstream. It is a vivid and realistic world that is far from reality. (Except perhaps the reality of markets and power.) Its favorite social types are those most sponsors are after. Fully half, across all programs, are white middle class males in the prime of life (young and settled adults). Another fifth are white middle class females of the same age range. That leaves 30 percent for the great majority of Americans, not to mention the world's people. All in all, men outnumber women three to one in prime time, even more in the news and in children's programs. More limited representation and life chances (except for the opportunity to get hurt or killed in the violence that still stalks at the rate of six times per prime time and 20 times per children's hour) go to young, old, nonwhite, blue collar, and other relatively less affluent consumer types. Crime is at least ten times as rampant as in real life. Those who protect us from it and other risks of life—law enforcers, attorneys, judges, doctors and other health professionals—are vastly overrepresented (and, I might add, overidealized).

Most of us have rarely if ever been in a surgical operating room, a courtroom, a police station, or an executive boardroom. Yet we know (or think we know) much about what goes on in all these places. Where from? The average viewer of prime time television alone sees every week into the lives and work of

44 enforcers and 23 violators of the law, ten doctors, six lawyers, three judges. Out of all the characters best known to most Americans, the fictional population of prime time, more than one fifth are involved in some governmental and another fifth in some business activity—all conveying lessons of a pervasive if indirect political import.

That is the world we have been monitoring now for two decades. It is impressive for its stability. Faces, formats, and styles come and go, but the basic composition of the television mainstream changes slowly and little, if at all. Even the fact that the majority of women now work outside the home has not significantly altered the old prime time character census. Behind the facade of constant novelty is the enduring expression of basic social relationships and values.

What are the lessons that successive generations absorb as they drift pleasantly down the great television entertainment mainstream?

We have characterized the main features of mainstreaming as the three Bs: blurring traditional social distinctions, blending otherwise divergent groups into the mainstream, and bending the mainstream in the direction of the medium's interests in profits, populist politics, and power.

Let us begin with an example that, ever since Karl Marx, most social analysts have taken for granted: that some basic political attitudes are rooted in the class structure. Well, they may be, but mostly for light viewers. Heavy viewers of all classes are more likely to say they are members of the mythical middle majority they see on television. The more that low-income viewers watch television, the more they call themselves "middle class." Conversely, the more that high-income Americans watch television, the more they claim to be just plain working people of "average income." That is *blurring*. If Marx were living today, he would call television, and not religion, the "opiate of the masses."

Probably the most general indicator of political attitudes is whether one calls one's self liberal, moderate, or conservative. When we compare the percentages of light and heavy viewers who choose each of these labels, we find that heavy viewers have absorbed the lesson of "moderation." They are less likely to call themselves either conservatives or liberals than comparable groups of light viewers, and more likely to say they are "moderates." That is *blending*.

That label, however, does not necessarily denote political moderation. When we examine the contribution television makes to viewers' positions on the critical political issues of equality and justice, fairness and individual rights, government spending, taxes, and big business, we find responses that make up the paradoxical but functional mix of the New Populism. That is *bending*.

Much of the action and of the lessons of television involve a mean world of violence and power dominated by white males in the prime of life. Those who spend much time growing up and living in that world tend to absorb its rules and apply them to the real world. They also tend to feel mistrustful and insecure (especially if they are not of the dominant majority types) and more in need of protection than do light viewers in the same social groups and living

under the same circumstances. It is not surprising, then, if heavy viewers demand strong measures and welcome restrictions or even repression (of others) if that makes them feel more secure.

Although heavy viewers tend to prefer the "moderate" label to both "conservative" and "liberal," the positions they take are closer to that of the conservatives. The most striking political difference between light and heavy viewers in most groups is the collapse of the liberal position as the one most likely to diverge from and challenge traditional assumptions. For example, the more most respondents watch television, the less they would vote for a woman for president and the higher they score on our sexism scale, a relative difference that is especially large for those who call themselves "liberals." (2)

The current runs in the same negative directions, but deeper, on the question of race. Among heavy viewers, the traditional liberal support for busing, open housing, intermarriage, and other racial and minority issues tends to erode. Viewing does not make much difference for those who call themselves moderates and conservatives but it brings liberals closer to them and into the television mainstream. (3)

Television also cultivates relatively restrictive attitudes about sex-related activities, personal rights and free speech. Opposition to homosexuality, abortion, legalizing marijuana, and to allowing "leftists" and "rightists" to speak freely is greater among heavy viewers, than among comparable groups of light viewers. The mean and dangerous world of television also cultivates hard-line postures: more viewing goes with more money for defense and for fighting crime and drug abuse. Those who call themselves moderates take up positions close to the conservatives and heavy viewing liberals also tend to converge on that position. Contrary to some recent charges, television is not a liberalizing influence for most viewers. (4)

The political conservatism of heavy viewers contrasts with their expansive wants. After all, television has to sell the sponsor's products, and you can't move goods in a climate of austerity. The consumer-oriented populism of the medium is reflected in the fact that the more viewers watch the less they want government to cut back on spending for health, the environment, education, the cities. And yet, heavy viewers are also more likely than light viewers in the same groups to say that "taxes are too high." The paradoxical bent of commercial populism is one source of an electorate at odds within itself.

The television mainstream bends in a generally populist, conservative direction, even if under the label of moderation. Why then, as some critics charge, is it so hard on business? The Washington-based business-supported Media Institute published a report on the image of businessmen on television suggestively titled "Crooks, Conmen, and Clowns," and Mobil has sponsored a series of advertisements on the subject.

Although some of these claims are overdrawn, our own studies also show that business executives are portrayed less favorably than such television heroes as doctors and enforcers of the law. The confidence ratings of big business,

as most institutions, has been going down in recent years. Business pays the piper; why doesn't it call the tune?

Of course it does. But the "tune" is *delivery* and not flattery. Television delivers the goods the sponsors pay for: the largest possible audience at the least cost. In order to do so, it has to cater to middle-American prejudices, including its suspicions of bigness. Of course, commercials extol the virtues of business; news and fiction have to strike a more credible balance. After all, the credibility of the medium is its bread and butter.

Television can best deliver the goods—audiences, sales, and votes—as it strikes that fractured tune I call the New Populism. New Populists think like conservatives, want like liberals and call themselves moderates. They shun what they see as "extremism" but demand harsher verdicts in the most jail-happy criminal justice system in the civilized world. They hate revolts except tax revolts. They want lower taxes but better education, cheaper medical care, solid social security, and roads without potholes. They distrust big government but want it to fix the economy, make the streets safe for their daughters and the world safe for what is defined for them as democracy. They scorn "The Establishment" but dote on the rich and famous. They graciously permit women to work both inside and outside the home, and believe that minorities have made some progress, but resent and resist any loss of privilege. They praise freedom but fear anyone who uses it. Feeling threatened in the violent world they see on television, they condone and even welcome repression if it tends to enhance their sense of security and morality. Fermenting that volatile brew of the New Populism, television makes a telling contribution to political orientations.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

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