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# EDUCATION AND THE CHALLENGE OF MASS CULTURE

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*Here is a perceptive analysis of the challenge of our present popular culture to education and of issues that might be studied in a university course on the social aspects of mass communication. George Gerbner is associate professor in the Institute of Communications Research, University of Illinois.*

**F**OR ABOUT the last 10 years, the study of mass communications and popular culture has come to be regarded increasingly as an educational responsibility. Attempts to meet this responsibility resulted in some useful publications. However, they made few inroads into the curriculum, and have scarcely been reflected in the preparation of teachers.

Perhaps the time is ripe to ask in what ways the educational response to the challenge of mass culture might bear fruit in the classroom. Our purpose is to pose this question by sketching the background of educational and scholarly attention, and by describing the assumptions, aims, and ideas guiding one approach to the study of the social aspects of mass communications.

## BACKGROUND OF ATTENTION

The lessons of two world wars and the history of the 1930's impressed us with the power of "propaganda." More rigorous study and sober reflection showed, however, that the most potent sources of influence stem from the popular cultural context of a time and place rather than from single messages, campaigns, or personalities.

The myth of one man's "power to mold men's minds" gave way to the conception of a more complex, subtle, and more pervasive role of mass communications and the popular arts in human life.

In that broadened context we attempted to sharpen and deepen our understanding of the cultural sources of our consciousness and actions. "Know thy communications to know thyself," a modern Socrates would have said, probably adding that "the unexamined culture is not worth living in."

Three-fourths of 100 basic references on research in mass communications compiled by Wilbur Schramm (9) were published since the end of World War II; half of them between 1948 and 1951. It was in that period that Gilbert Seldes proposed "a reevaluation of the popular arts in terms of physics rather than aesthetics, in terms of social effects rather than private pleasure" (10). And it was then that Dallas W. Smythe (12) called attention to the

... ironic paradox that our teaching is so heavily—and worthily—weighted with critical evaluation of literature and drama which occupy a minuscule part of our population's attention, while the real 'literature' and 'drama' of our culture, as measured by the proportions of our resources which go into them, consists almost entirely of the content of radio, movies, magazines, newspapers—and now television. Is the educational objective for 'complete living' being served? Whose 'complete living' is to be attained: that of the teachers, or of the students?

Since that time "mass culture has reached into the Academy both by its pervasive influence and as a subject of serious study," Bernard Rosenberg observed in the recent successful compendium on *Mass Culture; The Popular Arts in America* (8). *Mass Culture* and its companion volume *Mass Leisure* (6) are themselves part of this trend. Gilbert Seldes writing in the *Saturday Review* now calls for its extension all the way to the kindergarten (11).

The new type of academic attention devoted to mass-produced culture has also been noted in show business. The entertainment trade journal *Variety* devoted most of page 2 of its January 15, 1958, issue to the voices of the Academy. It cited Patrick D. Hazard of the University of Pennsylvania suggesting that "the college teacher is an important factor in the new equation of show biz . . ." And it observed with William D. Boutwell, director of Teenage Book Club: "If education is a process of preparing young people to do what they are likely to do anyway, isn't it the duty of the schools to teach the coming generation how to be masters, not slaves, of the mass media?"

The National Council of Teachers of English had thought so already in 1950 when it published its pioneering research bulletin on *Education and the Mass Media of Communication* (2). The National Society for the Study of Education devoted Part II of its

1954 Yearbook to *Mass Media and Education* (3). The former dealt primarily with the use of popular culture materials in the classroom; the latter undertook an examination of the mass media in society, as well as in the classroom. It was concerned, stated the Introduction, "not merely with reading tastes, listening tastes, or television tastes as ends in themselves. We want also to help people master the values, the insights, and the understandings which will enable them to live realistically—not in fantasy—in a natural world."

More recently the Educational Policies Commission of the NEA published *Mass Communication and Education* (7). This booklet expressed the conviction that "this is an appropriate time for educators to seek perspectives on one of the most important social forces of the times." It noted that mass communication has helped make a new kind of society and has given the teacher a different kind of student to teach.

The question that remains is: to teach what? But before taking up that question, let us try to state some basic assumptions and considerations about mass communications and popular culture in society, considerations which underlie our attempt to answer the question of content.

#### BASIC ASSUMPTIONS AND CONSIDERATIONS

Society is a pattern of living, labor, and communication through which members of the species *Homo Sapiens* become human.

Popular culture is the broadest communicative context of messages and images through which society reveals to most of its members the nature, varieties, limitations, and potentials of the human condition.

The normative social function of popular culture is, therefore, to make available to all members of the species the broadest range or meanings of their own humanity that society makes possible, and, in turn, to help them build such societies as new conceptions of the human potential might require.

Popular culture can fulfill such normative functions to the extent it makes available representations and points of view which enable men to judge a real world, and to change reality in the light of reason, necessity, and human values. To that extent, popular culture also forms the basis for self-government.

Man's experiments with self-government are predicated on a historically new conception of popular culture. This new conception

assumes that men have such consciousness of existence as they themselves provide for in communications; that reason confronts realities on terms culture makes available; that societies can be self-directing only to the extent, and in ways, their popular cultures permit them to be so.

Much has happened since some of these assumptions found expression in the First Amendment. Popular culture has come to be mass-produced and harnessed to the service of a marketing system.

The Founding Fathers made life, liberty, and property subject to law but tried to protect freedom of speech and press from the main threat *they* knew—government. They did not foresee the revolutionary cultural development of our time: the transformation of public communication into mass-produced commodities protected from the laws of the republic but subjected to the laws of property and of markets.

Today the words of Andrew Fletcher, uttered in 1704, reverberate in the halls of the Academy (and, at times, of Congress): "I believe if a man were permitted to write all the ballads, he need not care who should make the laws of the nation." For ours is a revolution in the making of all the ballads.

The "ballads" of an age are those vivid, dramatic accounts and images which appear to compel attention for their own sake and which, in so doing, provide common assumptions about man, life, and the world. They are the means that create the terms upon which society communicates to its members.

Today these means are big, few, and costly. They are owned, controlled, and supported by industrial enterprises of mass communication. These enterprises, and the industries which support them, bear central responsibility for decisions affecting popular culture. It falls to them to safeguard the freedom to reflect on the requirements and dreams of a real world of human needs. But there are neither Constitutional guarantees nor alternative forms of support to protect the mass media in carrying out these responsibilities and in safeguarding these freedoms. In the absence of positive guarantees of public support, the media must depend for survival on the formula equating value with customers, necessity with popularity, and freedom with the marketplace; they must respond, above all, to the needs of private investment and to the realities and requirements of the corporate world.

Students of the mass media recognize, as did Ruth Inglis in her study of *Freedom of the Movies* (5), that "essential as the functions of communication are, those who control the movies are not ex-

pected to put themselves out of business in order to perform them." Some take the view, as she did, that the self-interests of cultural industry and the public interest coincide in large part.

The question is in what part, at what times, and under what circumstances. For we also find at times necessities of survival do not have instantaneous box-office appeal. Virtue might not always be on the side of the best customers. Freedom does not necessarily inhabit the marketplace.

Educators especially have wondered about the consequences inherent in the compulsion to present life in salable packages. They have frequently observed that in a market geared to immediate self-gratification, other rewards and appeals cannot successfully compete. They have been concerned about subjecting young people to a dramatically accelerated impact of the adult social environment as the target audience of consumers presumably wish to see it. There is fear of distortion and moral confusion in the image of the human condition that might emerge. And there is suspicion that the appeal to juvenile fantasy, role-experimentation, curiosity, and even anxiety and revolt, may be based more on the private necessity for developing habits of consumer acceptance than on the public requirements of developing critical judgment and of defining essentials and satisfactions of a creative, useful life in a changing society.

There are those, too, who wonder about the consequences for society. Robert M. Hutchins, chairman of the commission which sponsored Miss Inglis' work, now feels "certain . . . that . . . if our hopes of democracy are to be realized, the next generation is in for a job of institutional remodeling the like of which has not been seen since the Founding Fathers" (4).

These are questions and issues of the highest importance to young people, directly pertinent to the task of building a culture in which self-government survives. They are also questions of personal relevance to every individual seeking such self-direction as critical grasp of the cultural terms of one's own consciousness can yield.

Such assumptions and problems support the case for the study of popular culture as a basic and necessary educational task. Against the background of such considerations, the social aspects of mass communications may be studied by relating the products, practices, uses and effects of cultural industry to the private functions of the mass media and to the public functions of popular culture. Ultimately both functions may be viewed in the light of

the normative historical tasks of society and culture in human life.

Let us now turn to some further considerations which mark the outline of a journey of ideas. They emerged from seven years' experience in conducting a college course in the Social Aspects of Mass Communications.

#### THE COURSE OF A JOURNEY

Parents of youngsters often wondered how they spent their time "before children." Today they are equally apt to ask, "What did we do before television?" Their children hardly believe there even *was* such a time.

Television is only the latest of a snowballing series of cultural developments. The older discontinuity of cultural experience between first and second generation Americans may give way to a new and even more pervasive gulf between successive generations. The peer group and popular culture appear to gain importance in the primary context of socialization. The mass media of communications emerge as ever more authoritative socializing agencies.

As a nation we now devote more time to the consumption of mass-produced communications than to paid work, or play, or anything except sleep (and the "late show" is cutting into that, too). Television alone, only 10 years old as a mass medium, now demands one-fifth of the average person's waking life. Comic books, 20 years old, can sell 1 billion copies a year at a cost of 100 million dollars—four times the budget of all public libraries, and more than the cost of the entire book supply for both primary and secondary schools. Movies, developed within a lifetime, reach 50 million people who still go to theatres each week, the same number who stay home and watch them on TV *each night*—a total of 400 million a week. Almost one-tenth of national income is invested in "leisure."

How do we manage that investment? What are the returns? What are the patterns, uses, and consequences of the mass-produced daydreams we share in common? What is the meaning of growing up, learning, and living in the new American culture?

These questions launch us on a curious journey. It is more exploration and discovery than "coverage" of a well-charted academic preserve. It brings together subjects traditionally separated. It touches closely upon some matters that have transformed the quality of life within a generation, yet have almost come to be taken for granted.

Social Aspects of Mass Communications is such a journey. Its course centers on the circumstances and consequences of cultural mass production and consumption—a subject area encompassing a large part of the soil and climate in which we grow up and learn.

The purpose of the course is to develop the approaches, values, and methods of social science in the consideration of mass communications as popular culture.

The main burden of the journey consists of ideas, reasons for holding them, and evidence supporting them. Activities include readings, discussions, demonstrations, and a group project involving joint study of a single subject such as science fiction, the Western, the image of Asia, or the portrayal of adolescents in the mass media. Individual student projects provide opportunities for probes in other directions.

The student does not require (nor should he expect to acquire) specialized skills in the manipulation of equipment, materials, or people. He will not prepare himself to “elevate” his tastes by criteria that never worked in the past, or to perform professional services required under conditions of employment in mass communications. He will be asked, rather, to *examine* conditions, to develop a way of *observing* circumstances of cultural mass production and consumption. This, we hope, will help him derive some insight into certain aspects of information, entertainment, and persuasion, and lead him to consider the formation of tastes, values, standards, and ways of professional conduct. Consideration of the role and functions of cultural industry in the life of a society might also enable him to speculate about what kinds of cultural aims can be fulfilled under what kinds of conditions.

We try to go beyond superficial or snob-classifications, such as hard cover vs. soft, slick vs. pulp, classical vs. popular, A vs. B movie, spectacular vs. daytime serial, and so on, on the assumption that any representation of life to which millions expose themselves deserves serious study.

Respect for time, skills, energies, and lives spent in creating and consuming cultural products of all sorts should mean two things: On one hand, it should help us avoid the pose of sitting in judgment over people; on the other hand, it should encourage scrutiny of the circumstances of cultural creation and consumption undaunted by critical acclaim, popular clamor, or opprobrium: it should point the way to examination of sources, production, content, and social implications in terms of human values and uses.

The outcome of the journey can, perhaps, be measured most meaningfully in terms of progress toward three types of self-direction: (a) consumer self-direction—making choices in the light of considered interests and values; (b) professional self-direction—making choices in the light of the responsibility of the professional or producer in popular culture for providing the choices for the consumer; (c) self-direction as a citizen—making choices in the management and control of social institutions, in the creation of the conditions upon which the choices of both consumer and professional or producer depend.

Now for a descriptive outline of the journey itself. In a sentence, the course is designed to help develop ways of observing the mass media as social institutions producing images of man, life, and the world, and to reflect on the uses we make of them.

This nutshell description identifies four phases of the course. The first has to do with the development of observing “familiar” things in ways different from casual, everyday observations. The second involves the observation of the mass media of communications as social institutions and of popular culture as a function of society and of human development. The third phase of the course deals with that body of representations and points of view which provides the cultural time-space context and value orientation of behavior we consider characteristically human. The fourth phase explores the uses we make of our investment in “leisure time” and the range of alternatives that meet the criteria of democratic society.

Let us take a passing glance at each of these phases and note some of the problems and considerations that mark the course of the journey.

*“To develop ways of observing . . .”*

Analysis is acute observation from conciously varied points of view. It begins with awareness of one’s position in relation to the thing observed, and goes on to search for the most valid point of view from which it can be observed to yield insight into its qualities and functions.

Assumptions, context, point of view, are key concepts in the discussion of observation and perception. They are involved in the ways we look at things, name things, use things; and, consequently, they are involved in the ways in which we *represent* things.

The analysis of communications is, therefore, compounded ob-

ervation: In looking at a picture, for example, we do not merely observe a "thing"; we observe an observation.

What's in a picture? A "thing" viewed from a "built-in" point of view, in a certain context, and probably on the basis of some implicit assumptions about the nature of the object or event portrayed. For example, the angle of the camera and the position of the lights used to take a photograph (and used to convey, implicitly, a point of view) are just as much objective elements of the picture as is the "thing" portrayed. If we are unaware of the fact that we are observing the picture *through the eye of a camera* (or of an artist), we have lost some of our own power of observation; we fall in, unwittingly, with a "given" point of view.

Communication thus functions in several dimensions and on several levels. The terms of perception (the way people, life, and the world are "looked at") become built-in attributes of the way people, life, and the world are depicted through communication.

Each medium has its own terms of "perception" and system of observation. This is partly defined by the technical nature of the medium and partly by the social and institutional structure of the enterprise. The mass media of communications are not merely "windows" to a world of reality and dreams; they are active creators of synthetic images and observers of both reality and dreams from points of view, contexts, and assumptions historically structured, socially and technologically determined. To become analytical observers of these communications, and of the patterns of culture they weave, we need to study the position of the mass media in society, and the points of view their position imparts to their messages. Then we need to define and validate the position from which *we* observe their observations.

*"The mass media as social institutions . . ."*

The dreams of sleep are individual and private in any society. But the popular daydreams of our industrial culture are privately mass-produced for a public market of shared desires. How did this arrangement come about? What are the communication requirements of mass production and the production requirements of mass communication? Are the media private business or public art?

Cultural (or any other) industry exists to produce at a profit. Regardless of the nature or quality of the product, if this bedrock requirement is not met, the enterprise goes out of business and investment goes elsewhere to seek returns. In the nature of commercial "free" enterprise, this is within the realm of private deci-

sions. Any investor, corporation, large or small business, may decide to produce or underwrite the production of almost any cultural product. This right is protected under the assumption (born of an age before mass communications) that spontaneous, private competition in the marketplace is the best way to assure cultural diversity, the availability of all points of view, and freedom of speech essential for self-government.

By entering the cultural marketplace, the entrepreneur may or may not be governed by, or even concerned with, the original reasoning that protects his access to the facilities which now dominate that market. But he must be concerned, and governed, by another set of considerations. He has acquired a stake in the *popularity* of his product. He has risked his capital on the assumption that a certain market is large enough, or can be *made* large enough, to make mass production of his commodity profitable.

So far this is still a private matter.

Now there is no formula for popularity, but neither is popularity entirely accidental when the stakes are high. "At BBDO there is no room for guesswork in planning the TV special," announced the giant advertising agency in a trade paper (1). And it went on to explain:

Everything begins with a marketing concept: a one-cent sale, a line introduction, a seasonal reason, a corporate profile to be etched indelibly in the public mind. This is the backbone of the event.

Next comes selection of the right property. . . . Then there's the clearance of the right time spot. . . . Trade and consumer campaigns must be coordinated. . . . Product and program promotion must be tied together. . . .

While this is all going on, one of the largest staffs of trained TV-research people helps us chart the show's course—they pre-test copy, analyze results and set ground rules for delivery of the next special.

The strategy of private enterprise mass production is geared to careful assessment, cultivation, and exploitation of marketable desires. A detachment of intelligence specialists probes public fancy; reconnaissance brings in the sales charts, cost-per-thousand figures, consumption statistics; corporate headquarters issues a series of battle orders; an army of popularity engineers prepares compelling messages designed to make the public want what it will get. Then vivid images of life roll out of the "dream factories," produced to exacting specifications to "give the public what it wants." These are the images and messages through which millions see, and judge, and live in the broader human context. They affect the tone of living and the pattern of society. They cater to an in-

satisfiable search for imaginative and informative representations of the human condition, for dreams that heal and restore, soothe and thrill, and bind men together across vast distances of space and time. They inevitably, and often unwittingly, help infuse life with direction, meaning, value.

*This is a public matter.*

*"Producing images of man, life, and the world . . ."*

At the private end of the transaction we observe problems of media ownership, control, and support, and we note market research gathering information about audiences and conditions of sale. At the public end we view social functions and controls and consider critical research inquiring into content. Then we see the two intertwined in the eyes of the beholder. We find the conditions of sale implicit in the content and quality of the dreams.

Beneath the overt forms of theme, plot characterization, reporting, description, even of light repartee, there are the covert elements of time, context, assumptions, point of view. In massive industrial enterprises such as the major communications media these elements are likely to be social rather than individual. A creator of mass cultural products who only wants to "express himself," a prominent screenwriter commented, "better go off to some other field where millions of dollars are not riding on his personal aspirations" (13).

Social content of media products becomes more discernible when large systems of output are studied and compared. Mass is part of the energy equation, and so is velocity. The atmospheric pressure of popular culture, as of gases, does not depend on the behavior of a single molecule. The laws of cultural dynamics, whatever they might be, will emerge from careful observations of the ways in which industrial and market conditions and the corporate positions of cultural enterprises—including their relationships to investors, agencies, sponsors, and their consequent approaches to audiences, to society, and to the world as a whole—implicitly shape the assumptions, contexts, and points of view imbedded in mass media products.

These covert elements of content are the "hidden messages" of popular culture—pervasive, subtle, yet obvious upon scrutiny. They spring from historical relationships and concrete circumstances of mass production. They are reflected in an ideological undertow expressed often through patterns of selection, omission, juxtaposi-

tion, through just the way things are looked at. Unwitting commitments to values, and to ways of perceiving, emerge from conditions of cultural production and consumption; they affect our assumptions about heroes and villains, love and sex, classes and professions, youth and old age, cooperation and conflict, past and future, ends and means. From these assumptions spring more mass-produced images of man, life, and the world.

*"And to reflect on the uses we make of them."*

One way to measure the usefulness of a civilization is to trace the time it allows, and the provisions it makes, for activities that relate directly to a diversity of human aspirations.

Judged by the criterion of time, ours has been a useful civilization. The historic compromise between time committed to necessary labor on behalf of a ruler, an employer, or a society, and time spent on behalf of one's chosen aims, seems to be rapidly changing. But the change is a perplexing one.

Our industrial order was once attacked for subjecting man to wage-slavery. It is now charged with operating a corporate "welfare state," exploiting the leisure-time markets it has brought into being, leaving little choice for individual self-direction between the dire alternatives of surfeit and boredom.

The building of markets *has* been among the prominent social uses of popular culture. Mass production requires mass markets. Mass markets are gained through mass audiences. Mass media of communication build mass audiences and, in the jargon of the trade, "deliver" them to mass producers through their ability to inspire and cultivate consumer desires for all types of goods and services.

But when consumer desires (or pocketbooks) appear to be drained, we find it difficult to flex our productive muscles to capacity except in war or in preparation for war. And we find it equally difficult to define creative tasks for the popular-culture arm of our industrial system.

So we use much of the leisure time gained through mass production to preach the gospel of more consumption right up to (and beyond) the limits of our ability to buy, use, or endure. And we tailor an increasing share of our popular cultural resources to the demands of salability, often irrelevant to creative purpose. This makes our machines more productive and our investments more profitable. To what extent, in what ways, and under what conditions can it also make *lives* more productive, and "leisure" *time* more creative?

“Pure entertainment” and “art for art’s sake” are disguised merchandising slogans we use to evade examination of the human significance of what we want to sell, or buy. The uses of a pill are not disclosed in the taste of its sugar coating. The functions of cultural products are not revealed in the likes and dislikes that determine our selection from what is available. Our choices have far-reaching consequences beyond those registered at the box office or on the cash register. Study of these uses and consequences touches upon the terms of our own self-direction, and upon some hidden paradoxes that blur our vision of the good life.

Not least among the paradoxes confronting “people of abundance” “killing time” in the “affluent society” is the shadow of *want*, rather than boredom or surfeit, in our own midst and around the world. Some government reports speak of as many as 1 out of every 5 American families living in stubborn pockets of permanent poverty. Poor people, poor customers, are the forgotten people of our public arts. Out of sight in the selective mirror of the mass media, hidden from public consciousness, without power and without a voice, they are overlooked when the uses of popular culture are discussed.

All in all, the majority of human lives around the world are still spent in brutal labor not only machines but animals could do as well, if not better. Saving rather than spending, boosting production to build the foundations of a more human existence rather than titillating lethargic consumers—these are the world-wide material and cultural imperatives of our age.

The means that glut us (and at what price?) could also make human want obsolete. The alternatives we present thus involve the fate of others. But never “only” of the “others”; the American “way of life” as we know it today rests on the active (or at least passive) cooperation of half the world’s peoples. Our decisions cannot long conflict with the needs and aspirations of the “others” without destroying the bases of any assumed benefits to us. The morality and usefulness of the alternatives we present, and of the decisions we make, can thus scarcely be shrugged off as a purely private matter of individual whim, taste, or enterprise.

Nor is that all of the paradoxes. The notion of self-government was predicated upon the existence of autonomous publics making conscious decisions in a cultural context of vigorous social criticism. This freedom and diversity was to be subject to no law, but guaranteed by law. The rise of cultural mass production, creating audi-

ences, subjecting tastes, views, and desires to the laws of markets, and inherently tending toward the standardized and the safe rather than the diversified or critical, creates new problems in the theory and practice of self-government.

Considered in such a perspective, the value and uses of time, resources, and energies invested in mass communications take on new dimensions. Are thirsts exploited or quenched? Are sensibilities dulled or sharpened? Are vital resources spent in anxious, unreasoning drift, or invested in relevant exploration? Are the choices we make based on the real alternatives of our time presented in a representative context of all pertinent evidence? By what criteria and by what methods do we judge the market value of leisure time and the survival value of popular culture?

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The journey ends, as it began, with a sense of discovering questions rather than of "covering" the answers. The issues explored do not require, or even permit, easy "solutions" arrived at in a classroom. They are permanent problems of personal judgment, professional conduct, communications research, social theory, and national policy. They have emerged as continuing responsibilities and challenge educational planning as the study of English or citizenship or science does. We have tried to indicate one possible response and to suggest that perhaps the time is ripe for more systematic planning. A good way to begin might be a series of experimental teachers workshops. The initiative could come from a number of fields. There are good reasons of past interest, current concern, and future professional orientation to suppose that it might come from those involved in the study and teaching of communications problems in education.

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