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Television: Mass Communication and Elite Controls

Television is an expensive technology which fosters control by the few with money and influence.

For most of this century, America has enjoyed a dominant position internationally. We have exported goods as well as capital, technology and technical know-how, films and television series to the rest of the world. We have had a proportionate amount of power and influence internationally and specifically a great deal of influence in both the economies and cultures of many countries.

Because of this, it may be hard for Americans to understand the strong reaction of other countries that may be in a more dependent situation to television programs for direct-broadcast satellites. If we can envision having most businesses in the United States owned or partly owned by foreign interests and viewing mostly foreign films and prime-time television, we might be able to empathize with the opposition of other countries to a laissez faire attitude about satellites and television.

The elements of the debate over satellites on which the United States was so overwhelmingly outvoted recently concerned two basic principles: the sovereignty of countries and the free flow of information among people and nations. The debate about national sovereignty is complex; there are arguments about the influence that our political power exerts on other nations, not to speak of the economic power and influence multinational corporations may wield within other sovereign states. Television is an information channel in the same way that books, musical records, tape recordings, radio, film and telephones are. Some information may be exchanged electronically; other information may be exchanged physically.

A principal assumption of the free flow of information is that it is a free exchange. If there is an imbalance in this information exchange, where one partner controls the communication channels as well as the ability to produce messages, then there cannot be a genuine free exchange, but only a reinforcement of the imbalance.

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Certain aspects of television as an information technology make the free flow principle difficult to foster. The use of direct-broadcast satellites only adds to these difficulties. Basically, television is an expensive and complicated technology, which fosters centralization and control by a few groups that have the money and influence to create and send messages. On an international level, this means that a few wealthy and technologically advanced countries have control over television messages and their distribution. Television's expense has meant that poorer countries have had to commercialize their broadcasting to a great extent and have been forced to buy cheap program series from dominant producer countries. The experience of many countries has been to watch television messages generated from outside their cultures; to have relatively little input at a national level and even less at a local level and to witness the fostering of consumer aspirations among its populations, for whom such habits were often inappropriate. Satellites only increase centralization and demand even larger audiences for cost-effective use. A few senders dominate the present television system; satellites will be developed and promoted by this same group of gatekeepers and will only increase the present one-way flow of information.

Imbalance of Power

Given this situation regarding transmission of television messages, many people are concerned about the influence

that continuation and reinforcement of this imbalance can exert. The argument is that television programs are either produced by the United States or imitative of them; consequently, the impact of television is to induce people of other countries to think and act in conformity with messages from outside their own country. This influence is due to a one-way flow of information that hurts, rather than helps, the development of other countries and ultimately is an infringement of their sovereignty.

Several basic assumptions on which the validity of this argument rests must be examined: the first concerns the messages, that they exist in sufficient quantity, are produced by certain structures and are broadcast widely enough to cause concern to governments. The second concerns the audience, that there are people who are exposed to these messages, that this exposure is widespread and extends over a long enough period to have an impact. The third concerns the nature of the influence that television has on these audiences, while the fourth deals with the value judgment of the influence. In order to judge the validity of arguments concerning television and satellites, the evidence on each of these assumptions requires review.

Impact of Television

We have all heard or read many arguments about the effects of television. Critics blame it for national crises, children's failure to achieve more in school or erosion of cultures and values. Proponents see it as a technology that, if used well, holds great promise for informing and educating great masses of mankind. Both sides present evidence to buttress their positions; both deny the legitimacy of contrary evidence.

An illustration of two groups speaking at cross purposes over this issue is found in *Television and Social Behavior: Reports and Papers*, the Surgeon General's report of 1971 on the impact of violence on television. Television industry spokesmen tended to dismiss the forty-two studies as not having "proved" the ill effects of television violence on audiences, especially children. Social scientists said that the weight of the evidence, although not containing "proof" in an absolute sense, certainly indicated that television violence had an impact and a bad one. What this debate demonstrates is that so-called objective scientific evidence is often interpreted to support a political position and is not as objective as some suppose.

Evidence about television and other mass media messages concerns the quantity, structure and direction of the flow of these messages. Regarding the quantity of television in the world, the evidence clearly shows an exponential increase worldwide. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization's (UNESCO) most recent survey (in *UNESCO Statistical Yearbook, 1971*) of mass media gives national figures for radio and television transmitter-receivers and hours of programming. There are comparative figures for

1960 and 1970. Even taking these figures as approximate, it becomes clear that electronic media have increased enormously over the last decade, radio even more so than television in Third World countries. In a survey of 110 countries, there were approximately 250,000 hours of radio programming a week. Others have estimated that the United States alone airs about 5,000,000 hours of television a year. Clearly, the amount of media production and hours of transmission is large and growing rapidly.

Many underdeveloped countries have been unsuccessful in using media to promote social welfare among their people.

Another area of message production critical for the free flow of information argument is the structure and flow of television between nations. In a recent study by the University of Tampere in Finland and a subsequent symposium on the topic, a great deal of new evidence has been gathered concerning this structure and flow. The authors of the study showed quite clearly what most people knew already: that "the United States is still the biggest TV programme exporter in the world and in most countries of the world American TV programmes compose a major part of all of the imported programmes." By contrast, the import of foreign television programs by the United States is negligible. This one-way flow of television is not a new phenomenon, nor is its origin obscure. It was built during the 1950s on the foundations of the United States film industry's distribution system developed before World War II. The Tampere study begins to document not only the structure of television production, its distribution and the direction of its flow, but also the kind of programs that get into the pipeline. The bulk of these are entertainment programs like "Peyton Place," "I Love Lucy" or "The Untouchables." The cultural values reflected in these programs do not conform to those of the importing country. Recently, the British Broadcasting Corporation found that their television imports (almost exclusively American) contained twice as many incidences of violence as British productions.

The Tampere study has documented the details of a picture that others began to sketch some time ago. Herbert I. Schiller, in *Mass Communications and American Empire* had already indicated the American dominance in international mass communications. Alan Wells, in *Picture Tube Imperialism? The Impact of U.S. Television on Latin America*, corroborates Schiller's findings. This particular kind of evidence documents the large amount of influence United States private enterprise has in the international communication field, especially in distribution of television. This is not in dispute, but the influence of this dominance through television messages is most in need of study and interpretation.

Television is an addictive habit. Estimates of television

viewing have been made for years by commercial firms in the United States and Western Europe. One recent estimate in the United States was that the television set of the average family operated about six hours every day. Even though audience research is less regular and television less saturated in many underdeveloped countries, exposure to television is a daily phenomenon for those who have access to a set. The UNESCO evidence also indicated that the number of sets, even in poor countries, is increasing rapidly. Use of satellites would make widespread distribution much more rapid among large rural areas of these countries.

Media Influence

Although there is little dispute about whether the mass media, and especially television, influence people, there is a great deal of disagreement as to how this takes place. Television may contribute to change in many aspects of people's thoughts and actions, in what they know and how they know it and in their attitudes and opinions as well as behavior. There have been attempts to disentangle the mass of variables that go into the complex relationship of media exposure and human knowledge, attitude and behavior, but no model has explained more than a part of the change. Neither experiments nor field studies have come up with a completely satisfying solution. This relative inconclusiveness in research is not only true of the impact of commercial or entertainment television programs, but also of educational television.

What is discouraging to people who see the potential of the mass media for beneficial social change is the contradictory phenomenon between commercial and educational media in many countries. Many underdeveloped countries have been unsuccessful in using media to promote social welfare among their people: at the same time, there is a widespread and growing use of commercial media whose audiences are faithful to soap operas, quiz programs or modern music in a way they are not to farm forums or health programs. Two radio audience studies, in Mexico (by the Fredrick Ebert Foundation Seminar on Rural Radio) and the Philippines (by the Institute for Communication Research, Stanford University), illustrate the unequal competition between information and entertainment programs. Both studies showed the audiences were almost unaware of important health, educational and even economic information, but were heavy listeners to music and entertainment. An interesting phenomenon in the Philippines study was that, in the relatively rural region where the study was done, eighteen different radio stations competed for audiences and advertising support. All tried to be "popular," carrying programs to which people would listen. Even when audiences do pay attention to information relevant to their own betterment, a great deal of evidence indicates that attitudes and behavior are slow to change.

Governments facing such contradictions may attempt to solve them by blaming the inroads of outside values (which

may be true) instead of finding out why people do not pay attention to and use the information offered to them over the mass media. To understand this situation better, we must view the mass media as part of a total social and cultural system and not as isolated phenomena unrelated to the environment.

An important breakthrough in mass media research came with a study of voting in the 1940 United States Presidential elections. In *The People's Choice*, Paul Lazarsfeld and his colleagues showed that the media were not so much like a hypodermic needle, directly affecting the individual, but worked through leaders who paid closer attention to the media and passed along information to others in an indirect or two-step manner. Thus, the media exerts influence through personal contact between the individual and his social group. The study also showed that voting habits were slow to change, but when they did, it was a result of the personal influence of opinion leaders and not directly through the media. This marked the beginning, in communication research, of seeing mass media as part of the larger system and the effects of the media as systemic ones reinforcing social and cultural change, but not directly causing changes.

By reversing the question of the social effects of the media to ask where important social and cultural change is found and then what role the media have played, we are more likely to discover the true role of the media as a contributor and not the root cause of change. Three examples are illustrative.

The People's Republic of China presents one of the most dramatic cases of profound social and cultural change in a society. Although not much direct information about communication in China is available, the pattern of change and media's role are beginning to emerge. Radio and the village amplifier, along with newspapers and wall posters, played an important role in relaying certain messages to large groups. Still, media were not the central factors of change. Face-to-face communication and persuasion was a more critical element. Change was reinforced by strong support from the central political power along with a restructuring of institutions to accommodate the change. What seems clear from the China case is that there was a systemic social change in which the media played a reinforcing, but not causal, role.

Although the media may contribute to changes in social systems, its use alone will not cause these changes. A radio school project in Honduras was geared to provide the motivation and basic education for rural people. After ten years of effort, an evaluation showed that the results, in terms of social change, were discouragingly small. The evaluator concluded that many of the changes advocated by the radio school project had little effect on the individual because the system of underdevelopment was unchanging despite appeals to the individual. As long as structures remained the same and political power did not encourage change, the media could do little to influence change.

A final example comes from Brazil, where a social change oriented radio project called Movement for Basic Education

had begun to attract a large audience of rural listeners before the military coup in 1964. It was subsequently changed and lost almost all of its audience and influence. What many media people ignore in this case are the origins of such a media-based movement. Only after a great deal of political ferment in rural areas and the beginning of the peasant leagues in the late 1950s was this radio project, as well as the Paulo Freire method, developed as a means of helping rural people change their situation. The effective use of media was, in this case, clearly subsequent to the beginning of social change due to political factors.

The media alone do not cause social and cultural change. The greatest impact of the messages of television or radio will be in reinforcing values that are already present or are being introduced through other forces in society. For educational use of the media, the lesson is clear. Social change for rural people, for example, will not take place simply because it is advocated by radio schools or on televised farm forums. Unless there are structural changes and backing by political power, the media are creating irrelevant messages that will largely be ignored.

Unless backed by structural changes and political power, media messages will largely be ignored.

Many have argued with some persuasiveness that American television programs reinforce a set of consumer values upon which our own social and economic system is based. In other countries, where the majority of audiences do not have consumer goods available, the result is the creation of a false and disruptive aspiration or a predisposition to become consumers of goods that large international companies are promoting. The amount of economic and political influence that such commercial interests wield is not easily measurable, but if these interests also control media messages (whether directly through foreign companies or indirectly through elite national groups) the elements for change are present. The problem for most governments is that the direction of social change and development advocated by official plan and that of outside investors may often be contradictory. Advocacy of rural development and dedication to self-sacrifice for one's country through a government media program may stand in sharp contrast to life-styles and values advocated by prime-time television imports (not to say the obvious life style of the elite in the big cities). Viewers are going to respond to the more credible message and accept the consumer message that their leaders have chosen to follow.

Value Judgments

Different sides of the controversy over the media do not dispute whether television has an effect, but rather whether a particular effect was observed and if that effect was good or

bad. In many countries, there are nationalistic arguments about the influence of foreign television, even that which purports to be educational. Peru was the only South American country to reject a Spanish version of "Sesame Street," saying that the program's values were not those that Peru wished to promote among her young children. Others have argued even more strongly that educational media like "Sesame Street" are less acceptable than entertainment programs like "Bonanza" or "Mission Impossible," simply because they more directly affect younger and more impressionable audiences. Many would dispute this judgment, but it is indicative of a basic problem in the use of media produced by outside sources. These media inevitably reflect the values of the social and cultural system where they were produced. Many countries cannot afford to produce programs to fill up their television schedules so they buy relatively cheap series from the United States and help make the foreign source's product even more profitable. The dilemma is that the United States government does not control media production and yet receives the brunt of the criticism for its effect in other countries.

Since part of the problem is the influence of the United States in the cultural arena of other countries, the ultimate solution will come from the countries themselves. Given the structure of international communications, immediate solutions will not be easy, but countries could respond in several ways. Many countries are anxious to develop a positive policy concerning television and satellites. They are not convinced that the technology is the problem, but the costs of both hardware and software are high, perhaps too high for them to afford. At the same time, they believe that television is potentially a very powerful medium of communication for development. In the face of this dilemma of high costs and potential benefits, many countries hesitate to make a decision.

New Cultural Models

For most countries, the simple alternative is to fill their hours of broadcasting with cheap American series or broadcasting only a minimum time each day. Most countries have chosen to use the expensive hardware and provide set owners with entertainment, even though it comes from outside their cultures. Given the structure of television production and its international distribution, the choice to fill screens with imported material has meant that most of it has been American, with the British and French in distant second and third place. Historically, most countries have chosen a full television schedule at relatively low cost, but they have done so at cultural and political costs.

Today, many countries would like to change this situation. Instead of obeying the pressure to fill up their television screens with many hours of imported programs from the United States, they would prefer a more balanced diet. The model of "cultural openness" to whatever the market situa-

tion offered is no longer acceptable to many countries that feel vulnerable to unwanted cultural influence. For years countries like Mexico and Canada were prime markets for United States films and television series. Although much still remains unchanged, there is strong political feeling about controlling the media so that they reflect the national culture more. Most smaller countries share these feelings, but have fewer means than Mexico and Canada to become culturally independent.

Alternative models of cultural independence for different countries to follow are not clear, but only a gradual solution to the problem seems likely. The goal is to become culturally independent or at least less dependent on one dominant culture—that of the United States. The first stage might call for a model of cultural pluralism. This stage would assume that a country could not simply blacken its television screens. On the other hand, it could not produce enough programs for local consumption. A trade-off of less programming time and more careful attention to purchasing would result in a better mix of television fare. Such a policy would cost more in time for purchasing programs, as well as increase the cost of series, since few other countries can compete with the price of American series. However, more countries would be encouraged to enter the international producing market, and purchasing countries, by thinking out more carefully what they want on their screens, would better define their television policy for a time when they can become more truly independent.

The second stage might be called cultural self-reliance because it would be a time when a nation could take care of most of its major television needs. This stage has both policy and technical requisites. Countries must have a clearly defined set of goals for their television capability as well as a trained group of producers to help achieve these goals. A few countries have refrained from getting into the television sweepstakes altogether. Tanzania has refused to use television because radio seems to be a more appropriate means of achieving the mass education and rural development goals it has set for itself. Niger has television, but uses it only for educational programs in schools. The few elites who bought sets years ago in anticipation of the usual influx of French entertainment programs are still waiting. Peru has tried recently to move into a more self-reliant position, but still depends on outside sources for programming.

The reaction of some in the United States to this increasing reluctance to use American products on the television screen has been to invoke the First Amendment or the principle of free flow of information. Self-reliance is seen as a form of cultural protectionism and some think we should respond with pressures on countries to remain contented consumers of our media messages. But the principle of free exchange of information depends on the ability of each country participating to share in this exchange. No one can truly share unless he is independent and has something to exchange. Given the virtually nonexistent flow of television programs or even

news from most countries to the United States, promotion of a better balance of information transfer is a first, vital step in genuine free flow of information.

The communication industry in the United States is only under indirect control or influence by the government. Yet, the government must negotiate our position on the satellite question in the United Nations (UN). Whatever the future of United States commercial dominance in international communications, the American government should demonstrate, by positive action, its commitment to the use of communication technology for the benefit of all and not simply the profit of a few.

There is no panacea for many nations' mistrust of the dominating influence of the United States. Nor is there a panacea in communication technology for solving deeply ingrained social and economic problems in other countries. Still, making sure that this technology is shared among nations would do much to advance the standing of the United States in the eyes of other nations.

The problem of communications involves power. No individual or country likes always to receive, but never send messages.

Positive Alternatives

Some policy suggestions for this positive action are as follows:

■ Before seeking solutions, we must be sure of the nature of the problems concerning free flow of information and the impact of communication technology. First, the appropriate United States government bodies (e.g., the State Department, Agency for International Development (AID), Department of Health, Education and Welfare and so on) should continue to inform themselves on the definition and explanation of these problems by:

- (1) Having access to research information in this field through universities and other sources;
- (2) Continuing to sponsor discussion and debate of the problems in seminars of this kind;
- (3) Listening to the points of view of scholars and decision makers from other countries so that wider cultural views might be represented.

ment, AID, National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) and other similar agencies, should foster better uses of communication technology for purposes of social development. AID and others, through multilateral agencies of the UN, could help countries develop self-reliance in mass media so that they would have genuine options to buying software from dominant communications countries. The promise of television for education and information has yet to be fully realized; the promise of less costly and more flexible technology under the control of each country may be an even more promising avenue for future development. Regardless

of strong United States economic interests in large communication technology, the United States should be open to alternative technologies which offer better solutions to educational problems.

■ The United States, through its appropriate agencies, should promote tests of television and satellite technology in experimental ways that might help solve pressing social problems, such as health care for the most isolated and poorest populations of countries. Field research should be carried out on the social impact of satellite television for such uses so that not only the hardware system is tested. This kind of information is important for countries to have when they are considering the decision of using satellite technology. However, "experiments" should not be used to dodge difficult problems through use of operational satellites.

■ The recent emphasis by the United States, in its international aid, on the social and economic development of the least developed nations and concern about equity and income distribution, should also include the use of communications. The potential of communication technology should be promoted for the benefit of the least developed and the most oppressed. This principle is not easily promoted with a technology developed for profitable urban countries, such as the United States, and will take thoughtful consideration from the United States, lest it simply aggravate problems of dominance of marginal people, whether by America or the elite of other countries. Satellite-conveyed services of television, radio or telephony will not automatically improve the lot of isolated rural people in underdeveloped areas, but as part of an integrated plan to better distribute services of education, health and information, satellites can improve the quality of life for such people.

Finally, the United States must recognize that the problem of communications involves power. No individual or country likes to always receive, but never send messages. Whether it concerns control of television in the United States by three major networks, world news flow by a handful of international news agencies or dominance of satellite technology by the United States, the problem is not essentially changed. There are always the few generating messages for the many. Man has the right to information, as well as *unbiased* information, which means at least some choice among different sources. Man also has the right to privacy, to not being invaded by persistent and unwanted messages from the outside by a group controlling the messages, whether this be a government or a commercial interest.

The United States can work positively to share satellite and communication technology with other nations. These steps should help counterbalance attitudes of distrust among other countries. Imbalances of power, whether economic, military or technological, will still remain and no external aid program will entirely eliminate them. The long-term solution is to help all people attain a more equitable share of this power in the economic and technological resources that can improve the quality of life for everyone. □