# CULTURE FOR THE MILLIONS?

## MASS MEDIA IN MODERN SOCIETY

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*PANEL DISCUSSION*

12 In Frank Stanton's words, "Any mass medium will always have to cater to the middle grounds . . . the most widely held, or cease to be."

13 Joseph Bram has called my attention to the several distinct phases of mass culture. It often begins with a rather moving attempt of the uneducated to become seriously educated. One sees this in countries beginning their industrial development. The adulteration of, and disrespect for, education comes with full industrialization, when the mass culture market is created and supplied with goods manufactured for it.

OSCAR HANDLIN

# Comments on Mass and Popular Culture

THE QUESTION of the uses of culture, raised in this discussion, offers a strategic point for analysis of the differences between those forms of expression communicated by the mass media and all other popular varieties of art. For, although no society has been devoid of culture, that which we now associate with the mass media appears to be unique in its relationship to the way of life of the people. A brief consideration of the function of culture will illuminate the character of that uniqueness.

Until the appearance of those phenomena which we now associate with the mass media, culture was always considered incidental to some social end. Men did not build architecture or compose music in the abstract. They constructed churches in which to worship or homes in which to live. They composed masses and cantatas as parts of a sacred service. The forms within which they built or composed were important in themselves, but they were also intimately related to the functions they served for those who used them.

Hence the significance of Miss Arendt's suggestive statement which pointed out that in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in Europe, culture acquired another kind of utility: that is, it became a means by which the bourgeoisie sought to identify itself with aristocratic society. I would add that an analogous development occurred in the United States in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, complicated by the fact that here the aristocracy was putative only and had to improvise its own standards. The difficulty of doing so brought the whole process to the surface and as a result it was much more open and visible in America than in Europe.

In any case, by 1900 almost everywhere in the Western world the term culture had acquired a distinctive connotation, just as the term Society had. Society no longer referred to the total order of the popu-

lace in a community, but only to a small self-defined segment of it. And culture no longer referred to the total complex of forms through which the community satisfied its wants, but only to certain narrowly defined modes of expression distinguished largely by their lack of practicality.

In the process of redefinition, culture lost all connection with function other than that of establishing an identification with that narrow society which had made itself the custodian of the values attached to the arts. The châteaux of Fifth Avenue were not erected to meet men's needs for homes, any more than the rare books of the tycoons were assembled to satisfy their desire for reading matter. Architecture, literature, art, and music, as defined by society and its intermediaries, became, rather, primarily the symbols of status.

That very fact, indeed, served Society as the justification of its aristocratic pretensions. "Changes in manners and customs," an influential manual explained, "no matter under what form of government, usually originate with the wealthy or aristocratic minority, and are thence transmitted to the other classes. . . . This rule naturally holds good of house-planning, and it is for this reason that the origin of modern house-planning should be sought rather in the prince's mezzanine than in the small middle-class dwelling."*

By the end of the nineteenth century, therefore, Americans could readily identify a miscellaneous congeries of artistic forms as their culture. The citizens of the Republic and foreign observers had no difficulty in recognizing what was American music, literature, or painting, for an elaborate apparatus of critical institutions—museums, orchestras, journals, and universities—existed to pass judgment on what belonged and what did not. These institutions and the impresarios who controlled them had the confidence and support of Society, that segment of the community which assumed that wealth or birth gave it leadership.

Outside the realm of the official culture as defined by Society there persisted other, but excluded, modes of action and expression. The peasants of Europe, the workers of the industrial cities, the ethnic enclaves of the United States did not share the forms of behavior, the tastes and attitudes of the would-be or genuine aristocracy, although they often acknowledged the primacy of the groups above them. But peasants, laborers, and foreigners did retain and employ in their own

* Edith Wharton and Ogden Codman, Jr., *The Decoration of Houses* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1897), p. 5.



lives a complex of meaningful forms of expression of their own. At the time these were commonly characterized as popular or folk culture. Thus in the early decades of this century, it was usual to refer to popular music, popular literature, and popular art, set off and distinct from *the* music, *the* literature, and *the* art of Society.

That designation was misleading, in so far as it carried the implication that popular culture was as coherent and uniform as the official culture. In actuality, popular culture, in America at least, was composed of a complex of sub-cultures. The mass of the population of the metropolitan cities, the Negroes, the farmers of the Great Plains, and other groups which together constituted the bulk of the American population had no taste for the music played by the Philharmonic or the novels approved by Thomas Bailey Aldrich or the paintings certified by Duveen. These people sang and danced, they read, and they were amused or edified by pictures. Only, what they sang or read or looked at was not music or literature or art in the sense defined by Society, and therefore was explained away by the general designation, popular.

Superficially, popular culture differed from the defined culture in the lack of an accepted set of canons or of a normative body of classics. A vaudeville song or a piece of embroidery or a dime novel was accepted or rejected by its audience without comparison with or reference to standards extraneous to itself. But this surface difference sprang from a deeper one. Popular, unlike defined, culture retained a functional quality in the sense that it was closely related to the felt needs and familiar modes of expression of the people it served. Popular songs were to be danced to, vaudeville to be laughed at, and embroidery to he worn or to cover a table.

The development of mass culture—or more properly speaking of the culture communicated through the mass media—has had a disturbing effect upon both popular and defined cultures. The consequences for the latter are the easier to distinguish, for it left not only vestiges but a record of its past which makes possible ready comparisons with the present.

It is far more difficult to make similar comparisons in the case of popular culture. Precisely because it lacked a canon, it also lacked a history. It was not only displaced by later forms; its very memory was all but obliterated. As a result we know very little about the culture that until recently served the people who now consume the products of the mass media. And that gap in our information has

given rise to the misconception that the "mass culture" of the present is but an extension of the popular culture of the past.

Yet if that popular culture did not produce its own record, it can be pieced together from fragmentary historical materials which reveal that the mass media have had as deep an impact upon popular as upon official culture. The Ed Sullivan show is not vaudeville in another guise any more than "Omnibus" is a modernized Chautauqua. Television, the movies, and the mass-circulation magazines stand altogether apart from the older vehicles of both popular and defined culture.

An examination of the popular theater, of vaudeville, of the popular newspapers, especially in the Sunday supplements, and of the popular literature of the 1890's reveals four significant elements in the difference between the popular culture of that period and that communicated by the mass media of the present.

In the first place, popular culture, although unstructured and chaotic, dealt directly with the concrete world intensely familiar to its audience. There was no self-conscious realism in this preoccupation with the incidents and objects of the everyday world. Rather, this was the most accessible means of communication with a public that was innocent in its approach to culture, that is, one that looked or listened without ulterior motive or intent.

In the second place, and for similar reasons, popular culture had a continuing relevance to the situation of the audience that was exposed to it. That relevance was maintained by a direct rapport between those who created and those who consumed this culture. The very character of the popular theater, for instance, in which the spontaneous and the "ad lib" were tolerated, encouraged a continuous and highly intimate response across the footlights. So too, the journalism of the American ethnic sub-groups maintained an immediate awareness of the needs and problems of their readers. In general, furthermore, in all media, the writers and actors sprang from the identical milieu as their audience did, and maintained a firm sense of identification with it.

In the third place, popular culture was closely tied to the traditions of those who consumed it. A large part of it was ethnic in character, that is, arranged within the terms of a language and of habits and attitudes imported from Europe. But even that part of it which was native American and which reached back into the early nineteenth and eighteenth centuries, maintained a high degree of continuity with its own past.



Finally, popular culture had the capacity for arousing in its audience such sentiments as wonder and awe, and for expressing the sense of irony of their own situation which lent it enormous emotional power. Men and women shed real tears or rocked with laughter in the playhouses of the Bowery, as they could not in the opera or the theater uptown. The acrobats and the animals of the circus evoked wonder as the framed pictures of the museum could not. The difference was the product of the authenticity of the one type of culture and the artificiality of the other.

Out of American popular culture there emerged occasional bursts of creativity of high level. Instances may be found in the work of Charlie Chaplin, in some of the jazz music of the decade after 1900, and in that strain of literary realism developed by novelists and dramatists whose experience in journalism had brought them into direct contact with popular culture.

In total perspective, however, popular culture was not justified by such by-products so much as by the function it served. Millions of people found in this culture a means of communication among themselves and the answers to certain significant questions that they were asking about the world around them. Indeed, it was the perception of this function that attracted the avant-garde in the opening decades of the twentieth century. Those creative spirits, repelled by the inert pretensions of official culture, often found refreshing elements of authenticity in the popular culture of their times. Bohemia, too, was a kind of ghetto in which the artist, equally with the Italian or Negro laborer, was alien, cut off from respectable society. In fact some of the Bohemians were inclined to idealize popular culture in revulsion against the inability of the official culture to satisfy their own needs.

In the light of these considerations, it is possible to begin to assess the effects of the mass media on the character of popular culture. To some extent the impact of the new media is simply a product of their size. The enormous growth of these media has been of such an order as to involve immediate qualitative changes. The transformation of an audience, once numbered in the thousands, to one of millions profoundly altered all the relationships involved. More specifically, the impact of the mass media has altered the earlier forms of control; it has deprived the material communicated of much of its relevance; and it has opened a gulf between the artist and the audience.

A good deal of the familiar talk about the degree to which advertisers or bankers or interest groups control the mass media is irrele-

vant. There has been a genuine change in the character of the control of these media as contrasted with the situation of fifty or sixty years ago. But it has taken a more subtle form than is usually ascribed to it.

What is most characteristic of the mass media today is precisely the disappearance of the forms of control that existed in the popular culture of a half-century ago. No one can decide now (as Hearst or Pulitzer could in 1900) to use a newspaper as a personal organ. Nor could any TV or movie executive, advertiser, agent, or even a large sector of the audience dictate the content of what is transmitted through these media. The most they can do is prevent the inclusion of material distasteful to them.

The only accurate way of describing the situation of the mass media is to say they operate within a series of largely negative restraints. There are many things they cannot do. But within the boundaries of what they may do, there is an aimless quality, with no one in a position to establish a positive direction. In part this aimlessness is the product of the failure to establish coherent lines of internal organization; in part it flows from the frightening massiveness of the media themselves; but in part also it emanates from a lack of clarity as to the purposes they serve.

The inability to exercise positive control and the concomitant inability to locate responsibility heighten the general sense of irrelevance of the contents of the mass media. It would, in any case, be difficult for a writer or performer to be sensitive to the character of an unseen audience. But the problems are magnified when the audience is numbered in the millions, in other words, when it is so large that all the peculiarities of tastes and attitudes within it must be canceled out so that all that remains is an abstract least common denominator. And those problems become insoluble when no one has the power or the obligation to deal with them.

In the world of actuality, Americans are factory workers or farmers, Jews or Baptists, of German or Irish descent, old or young; they live in small towns or great cities, in the North or the South. But the medium which attempts to speak to all of them is compelled to discount these affiliations and pretend that the variety of tastes, values, and habits related to them do not exist. It can therefore only address itself to the empty outline of the residual American. What it has to say, therefore, is doomed to irrelevance in the lives of its audience; and the feedback from the consciousness of that irrelevance, without



effective countermeasures, dooms the performer and writer to sterility.

The critics of the mass media are in error when they condemn its products out of hand. These media can tolerate good as well as bad contents, high as well as low art. Euripides and Shakespeare can perfectly well follow the Western or quiz show on TV, and the slick magazine can easily sandwich in cathedrals and madonnas among the pictures of athletes and movie queens.

What is significant, however, is that it does not matter. The mass media find space for politics and sports, for science and fiction, for art and music, all presented on an identical plateau of irrelevance. And the audience which receives this complex variety of wares accepts them passively as an undifferentiated but recognizable series of good things among which it has little capacity for choice, and with which it cannot establish any meaningful, direct relationship.

The way in which the contents of the mass media are communicated deprives the audience of any degree of selectivity, for those contents are marketed as any other commodities are. In our society it seems possible through the use of the proper marketing device to sell anybody anything, so that what is sold has very little relevance to the character of either the buyers or of the article sold. This is as true of culture as of refrigerators or fur coats. The contents of the magazine or the TV schedule or the newspaper have as little to do with their sales potential as the engine specifications with the marketability of an automobile. The popularity of quiz shows no more reflects the desires of the audience than the increase in circulation of *American Heritage* or *Gourmet* reflects a growing knowledge of American history or the development of gastronomic taste, or, for that matter, than the efflorescence of tail fins in 1957 reflected a yearning for them on the part of automobile buyers. All these were rather examples of excellent selling jobs.

The mass media have also diluted, if they have not altogether destroyed, the rapport that formerly existed between the creators of popular culture and its consumers. In this respect, the television playlet or variety performance is far different from the vaudeville turn, which is its lineal antecedent. The performer can no longer sense the mood of his audience and is, in any case, bound by the rigidity of his impersonal medium. The detachment in which he and they operate makes communication between them hazy and fragmentary. As a result, the culture communicated by the mass media

cannot serve the function in the lives of those who consume it that the popular culture of the past did.

Yet the latter was no more able to withstand the impact of the mass media than was official culture. The loose, chaotic organization of popular culture, its appeal to limited audiences, its ties to an ethnic past attenuated with the passage of time, all prevented it from competing successfully against the superior resources of the mass media. Much of it was simply swallowed up in the new forms. What survived existed in isolated enclaves, without the old vitality.

The most important consequences of this change were the destruction of those older functional forms of popular culture, the separation of the audience from those who sought to communicate with it, and the paradoxical diminution of the effectiveness of communication with the improvement of the techniques for communication. Thus far the result has been a diffusion among the audience of a sense of apathy. The intense involvement of the masses with their culture at the turn of the century has given way to passive acquiescence. Concomitantly, the occasional creative artist who wishes to communicate with this audience has lost the means of doing so. At best his work will be received as one of the succession of curious or interesting images that flicker by without leaving an enduring impression upon anyone's consciousness.

Thus there is passing a great opportunity for communication between those who have something to say and the audiences who no longer know whether they would like to listen to what there is to be said.

LEO ROSTEN

# The Intellectual and the Mass Media: Some Rigorously Random Remarks

MOST INTELLECTUALS do not understand the inherent nature of the mass media. They do not understand the process by which a newspaper or magazine, movie or television show is created. They project their own tastes, yearnings, and values upon the masses—who do not, unfortunately, share them. They attribute over-simplified motivations to those who own or operate the mass media. They assume that changes in ownership or control would necessarily improve the product. They presume the existence of a vast reservoir of talent, competence, and material which does not in fact exist.

A great deal of what appears in the mass media is dreadful tripe and treacle; inane in content, banal in style, muddy in reasoning, mawkish in sentiment, vulgar, naïve, and offensive to men of learning or refinement. I am both depressed and distressed by the bombardment of our eyes, our ears, and our brains by meretricious material designed for a populace whose paramount preferences involve the narcotic pursuit of "fun."

Why is this so? Are the media operated by cynical men motivated solely by profit? Are they controlled by debasers of culture—by ignorant, vulgar, irresponsible men?

Many intellectuals think so and say so. They think so and say so in the face of evidence they either do not examine or cannot bring themselves to accept: that when the public is free to choose among various products, it chooses—again and again and again—the frivolous as against the serious, "escape" as against reality, the lurid as against the tragic, the trivial as against the serious, fiction as against fact, the diverting as against the significant. To conclude otherwise is to deny the data: circulation figures for the press, box-office receipts