CULTURE FOR THE MILLIONS?

MASS MEDIA IN MODERN SOCIETY

Edited by

NORMAN JACOBS

With an Introduction by

PAUL LAZARSFELD

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Participants

HANNAH ARENDT: Philosopher and author of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* and *The Human Condition.*

JAMES BALDWIN: Novelist and author of *Giovanni's Room*

DANIEL BELL: Associate Professor of Sociology, Columbia University.

ARTHUR BERGER: Professor of Music, Brandeis University.

ALAN WILLARD BROWN: Former President, Metropolitan Educational Television Association.

H. WILLIAM FITELSON: Attorney and communications specialist.

CHARLES FRANKEL: Professor of Philosophy, Columbia University.

NATHAN GLAZER: Sociologist.

ERNEST VAN DEN HAAG: Adjunct Professor of Social Philosophy, New York University, and lecturer, New School for Social Research.

OSCAR HANDLIN: Director, Center for the Study of the History of Liberty in America, Harvard University.

PATRICK HAZARD: Professor of American Civilization, University of Pennsylvania.

SIDNEY HOOK: Chairman, Department of Philosophy, New York University.

GERALD HOLTON: Associate Professor of Physics, Harvard University, and Editor of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

H. STUART HUGHES: Professor of History, Harvard University.

STANLEY EDGAR HYMAN: Author and critic, lecturer at Bennington College.

NORMAN JACOBS: Educational Director, Tamiment Institute, and lecturer, Division of General Education, New York University.

RANDALL JARRELL: Poet, critic, and Professor of English, Women's College of the University of North Carolina.

IRVING KRISTOL: Editor, Basic Books.

PAUL LAZARSFELD: Chairman, Department of Sociology, Columbia University.

LEO LIONNI: Art Director, *Fortune.*

LEO LOWENTHAL: Professor of Sociology, University of California at Berkeley.

WILLIAM PHILLIPS: Editor, *Partisan Review.*

BERNARD ROSENBERG: Associate Professor of Sociology, City College of New York.

LEO ROSTEN: Author and editorial advisor to *Look Magazine*.
ROBERT SAUDEK: Television producer, Robert Saudek Associates.
ARTHUR SCHLESINGER, JR.: Former Professor of History, Harvard University.
GILBERT SELDES: Director, Annenberg School of Communications, University of Pennsylvania.
EDWARD SHILS: Professor of Sociology and Social Thought, University of Chicago.
FRANK STANTON: President, Columbia Broadcasting System.
JAMES JOHNSON SWEENEY: Former Director, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum.
MELVIN TUMIN: Professor of Sociology, Princeton University.

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ARTHUR SCHLESINGER, JR.

Notes on a National Cultural Policy

TOO MUCH DISCUSSION of the problems of mass culture takes the form of handwringing. The point to be understood, I would think, is that these problems, while complicated and often discouraging, are by no means insuperable, unless we ourselves make them so. Things can be done in all sorts of ways to counteract the more depressing tendencies in our mass civilization. I would like in this brief note to call particular attention to possibilities in the field of public policy.

Let me begin with something both important and specific—that is, the problem of television. There are now over 50 million television sets in the country, covering almost 90 percent of American households. From its inception, television has been in a downward spiral as an artistic medium; but it has taken recent disclosures of fraud in quiz programs to awaken the nation to the potentialities locked up in the tiny screen. The question is: what, if anything, can be done to improve the honesty and the quality of our television programing?

The first point is that television is an area in which there can be no question concerning the direct interest of the national government. No one has a divine right to a television channel. The air belongs to the public; and private operators can use the air only under public license. Why therefore should the national government stand helplessly by while private individuals, making vast sums of money out of public licenses, employ public facilities to debase the public taste? Obviously there seems no reason in law or prudence why this should be so. Government has not only the power but the obligation to help establish standards in media, like television and radio, which exist by public sufferance.

It has this obligation, among other reasons, because there seems no other way to rescue television from the downward spiral of com-

petitive debasement. There are responsible and enlightened men managing television networks and stations; but they are trapped in a competitive situation. The man who gives his audience soap opera and give-away shows will make more money for his stockholders than the man who gives his audience news and Shakespeare. In consequence, the tendency is almost irresistible for television programs to vie with each other, not in elevating the taste of their audiences, but in catering to the worst side of the existing taste. As *Fortune* recently summed up the situation, it seems "that television has reached a kind of ceiling, that mediocrity is increasing, and that only *through some drastic change in the medium's evolution* will the excitement and aspiration of, say, 1954 return to our TV screens" (my italics). *Fortune*'s analysis was, as usual, better than its solution, which was Pay TV. Pay-as-you-see TV would be no more exempt from the passion to maximize its audiences than is free TV; and, in due course, it would doubtless undergo the same evolution. (See *Fortune*, December 1958.)

Still "some drastic change in the medium's evolution" remains necessary. But what? Actually there is nothing new about the situation of responsible TV people; they are in precisely the position that responsible businessmen were in twenty-five years ago when they wanted, for example, to treat their workers better but could not afford to do so because of the "competitive situation." Thus many employers disliked sweatshops and child labor but knew that raising wages and improving working conditions would increase their costs and thereby handicap them as against their more callous competitors. Private initiative was impotent to deal with this situation: gentlemen's agreements within an industry always broke down under pressure. There was only one answer—public action to establish and enforce standards through the industry. Finally the Wages and Hours Act required all employers in interstate commerce to meet certain specifications and thus abolished the economic risks of decency.

What television needs is some comparable means of equalizing the alleged competitive disadvantages of enlightened programing. Fortunately the machinery for this is already at hand. According to the Communications Act of 1934, the Federal Communications Commission is to grant licenses to serve the "public convenience, interest, or necessity." A television channel is an immensely lucrative thing; and those lucky enough to secure an FCC license ought to be regarded, not as owners of private property with which they can do

anything they want, but as trustees of public property under the obligation to prove their continuing right to the public trust.

It is up to the FCC, in short, to spell out the equivalent of minimum wages and maximum hours for television. What would this imply? It would surely imply the following:

1. A licensing system which would cover networks as well as individual stations.

2. The writing into each license of a series of stipulations which the grantee pledges himself to fulfill in order to retain the license.

3. A major stipulation would be the assumption by the networks and stations of full control over their programing—which means that sponsors and advertising agencies would no longer influence the content of programs. Other media live off advertisements without letting advertising agencies and sponsors dictate and censor content as they do in television. So long as television permits this, it will be fourth-rate. We should go over to the British and Canadian systems, in which the advertiser purchases time on the air as he purchases space in a newspaper, and has to leave editorial matters alone.

4. Other stipulations might include the allocation of stated portions of broadcast time to cultural and educational programs, to programs dealing with public issues, to local live programs; the limitation of advertising (the House of Commons has currently under consideration a bill prohibiting advertising on British TV for more than six minutes in any hour); the allocation of free time duriug presidential campaigns to all parties polling more than 10 percent of the vote in the previous election.

5. Licenses should come up for annual renewal; and stations which have not met their obligations should expect to have their licenses revoked (the FCC has not refused a request for license renewal since 1932).

6. All this implies, of course, a revitalization of the FCC, which once had chairmen and commissioners of the caliber of Paul Porter, James Lawrence Fly, and Clifford Durr, but has become in recent years the preserve of complaisant political hacks.

Back in 1946, the FCC proposed in its famous Blue Book doing much this sort of thing for radio; but the industry issued the standard lamentations about governmental control, the public remained indifferent, and nothing came of it. One can expect to hear the same

wail of "censorship" raised now against proposals for the establishment of federal standards. The fact is that we already have censorship of the worst kind in television. As John Crosby has written, "So long as the advertiser has direct personal control over programs, or direct ownership of programs, it's silly to talk about [government] censorship. The censorship is already stifling. The government sbould step in not to censor broadcasting but to free it."

The setting of federal standards does not mean government domination of the medium, any more than the Wages and Hours Act meant (as businessmen cried at the time) government domination of business. But the rejection of the Blue Book in 1946 emphasizes the difficulty of the problem. The FCC, even reconstituted as it would bave to be in another administration, could not tighten up federal standards by itself. If the FCC proposes to buck the industry, it will require organized public support; it is perhaps a mistake that public energy which might have gone into establishing general standards was diverted into setting up separate facilities for educational television. And the FCC would also probably require some form of administration supplementation—perhaps a National Citizens' Advisory Board, of the kind proposed some years ago by William Benton,[1] or a National Broadcasting Authority, financed by rentals on the licenses, of the sort recently suggested by John Fischer in *Harper's*.[2]

The measures proposed above represent a minimum program. Walter Lippmann and otbers have recently argued for the establishment of a public network to be "run as a public service with its criterion not what will be most popular but what is good." Lippmann does not suppose that such a network would attract the largest mass audience. "But if it enlisted the great talents which are available in the industry, but are now throttled and frustrated, it migbt well attract an audience which made up in influence what it lacked in numbers. The force of a good example is a great force, and should not be underrated." Proposals of this sort still horrify many Americans, though fewer now than in the days when Charles Van Doren was a community hero. But clearly, if television cannot clean its own house and develop a sense of responsibility commensurate with its influence, we are bound to come to a government network. If, as Dr. Frank Stanton of the Columbia Broadcasting System insists (*his* italics), "*The strongest sustained attention of Americans is now, daily and nightly, bestowed on television as it is bestowed on nothing*

else,"[3] then television is surely a proper subject for public concern. If the industry will not undertake to do itself what is necessary to stop the drift into hopeless mediocrity (and, far from showing any signs of so doing, its leaders deny the reality of the problem and even justify the present state of things by pompous talk about "cultural democracy"), then it must expect public intervention.

The case for government concern over television is indisputable because government must control the air. The case for government concern over other arts rests on a less clear-cut juridical basis. Yet, as John Quincy Adams said one hundred and thirty-five years ago, "The great object of the institution of civil government is the improvement of the condition of those who are parties to the social compact, and no government, in whatever form constituted, can accomplish the lawful ends of its institution but in proportion as it improves the condition of those over whom it is established." Adams added that this applied no less to "moral, political, intellectual improvement" than to internal improvements and public works.

The American government has acknowledged this responsibility variously and intermittently since its foundation. But the problem of government encouragement of the arts is not a simple one; and it has never been satisfactorily solved. In order to bring some coherence into its solution, Congressman Frank Thompson, Jr., of New Jersey has been agitating for some time for the establishment of a Federal Advisory Council on the Arts, to be set up within the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare and charged with assisting the growth of the fine arts in the United States. "A major duty of the Council," the bill (H.R. 7656) reads, "shall be to recommend ways to maintain and increase the cultural resources of the United States."

There is no automatic virtue in councils. Congressman Thompson and Senator Fulbright, for example, got through Congress a year ago an act establishing a National Cultural Center in Washington. After a protracted delay, President Eisenhower named the thirty-four members of the new Center's board of trustees. Of the whole group, only a handful had shown any evidence of knowing or caring anything about the arts; the typical members include such cultural leaders as the former football coach at West Point, the President's minister (balanced, of course, by Catholic and Jewish clerics), his television adviser, representatives of labor, etc. A Federal Advisory Council on the Arts, appointed on such principles, would be worse than useless. But in due course some President will seek our genuine

leaders of the arts and ask them to think through the issues of the government relationship.

Let no one mistake it: there are no easy answers here. But also there has been, in this country at least, very little hard thought. Government is finding itself more and more involved in matters of cultural standards and endeavor. The Commission of Fine Arts, the Committee on Government and Art, the National Cultural Center, the Mellon Gallery, the poet at the Library of Congress, the art exhibits under State Department sponsorship, the cultural exchange programs—these represent only a sampling of federal activity in the arts. If we are going to have so much activity anyway, if we are, in addition, worried about the impact of mass culture, there are strong arguments for an affirmative governmental policy to help raise standards. Nor is there reason to suppose that this would necessarily end up in giving governmental sanction to the personal preferences of congressmen and Presidents—e.g., making Howard Chandler Christy and Norman Rockwell the models for American art. Congressmen have learned to defer to experts in other fields, and will learn to defer to experts in this (one doubts, in any case, whether the artistic taste of politicians is as banal as some assume; certainly the taste of the two most recent governors of New York is better than that of most professors).

Certain steps are obvious. Whereas many civilized countries subsidize the arts, we tend to tax them. Let us begin by removing federal taxes on music and the theater. Then we ought to set up a Federal Advisory Council on the Arts composed, not of presidential chums and other hacks, but of professional and creative artists and of responsible executives (museum directors, presidents of conservatories, opera managers, etc.). This Council ought to study American precedents in the field and, even more important, current experiments in government support of the arts in Europe. A program of subsidies for local museums and galleries, for example, would be an obvious possibility.

There is a considerable challenge to social and administrative invention here. As the problems of our affluent society become more qualitative and less quantitative, we must expect culture to emerge as a matter of national concern and to respond to a national purpose. Yet the role of the state can at best be marginal. In the end the vitality of a culture will depend on the creativity of the individual and the sensibility of the audience, and these conditions depend on factors of which the state itself is only a surface expression.

REFERENCES

1 William Benton, in his testimony before the Senate Interstate Commerce Committee, printed in the 31 May 1951 issue of the *Congressional Record* (A3313-7).

2 John Fischer, "Television and Its Critics," *Harper's Magazine*, July 1959, 219: 10-14.

3 Frank Stanton, "The Role of Television in Our Society," an address of 26 May 1955.

A General Theory of Mass Culture

Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.: I feel that there is a danger in this discussion of mass culture: the danger of excessive Platonization; that is, taking mass culture as one distinct entity and elite culture as another, each with essences of its own and the product of each having no relation to the product of the other.

Miss Arendt in her brilliant but somewhat artificial analysis suggested that society "produced" culture and mass society "consumed" entertainment. I think that these are useful distinctions if we consider them as representing certain extremes; but if we consider them as corresponding to qualitative distinctions in reality, the consequences are misleading.

I should propose that what is involved is more of a continuum than a deep and essential difference. If this is so, the distinction between mass culture and elite culture is not so absolute as some of the critics and the commentators would suppose. This would imply that the problem of mass culture itself is neither clearcut nor hopeless but rather ambiguous. It is clearly not one of inexorable, unilineal decay, as Mr. Van den Haag seemed to believe. In fact, I felt that Mr. Van den Haag's paper was largely a comparison of the cultural experience of past minorities with the cultural experience of present majorities. In pre-mass societies what cultural experience the few had was purchased at the price of considerable squalor and deprivation for the rest. We are past that stage in history and we have to come to terms with the consequences of social democracy.

Many people in this society cannot bear high level aesthetic experience. But this is not the result of mass culture. It is the consequence of the distribution of vitality and sensitivity in society.

The problem is an indeterminate one. Its very ambiguity means that we can do much more about it than we sometimes suppose. People who criticize the passivity produced by mass culture are often