CULTURE FOR THE MILLIONS?

MASS MEDIA IN MODERN SOCIETY

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With an Introduction by

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BEACON PRESS BOSTON

First published as a Beacon Paperback in 1964 by arrangement with D. Van Nostrand Company, Inc.

Printed in the United States of America

International Standard Book Number: 0–8070–6199–9
Fourth printing, April 1971

Beacon Press books are published under the auspices of the Unitarian Universalist Association

This book is the collective work of a group of social scientists, creative artists, representatives of the mass media, critics, historians, and philosophers. It is based on papers presented and discussed at a seminar sponsored jointly by the Tamiment Institute and *Daedalus*, the Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, and held at Tamiment-in-the-Poconos in June 1959. All the essays except those by Paul F. Lazarsfeld, Arthur Berger, and Leo Lowenthal have been published previously in *Daedalus* and are used with its permission.

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PANEL DISCUSSION

Responsibility increases with capacity, and should be demanded of those in positions of power. Just as I hold the intellectual more responsible than others for the rigorous exploration of phenomena and the courageous enunciation of truths, so, too, do I ask for better and still better performance from those who have the awesome power to shape men's minds.

FRANK STANTON

Parallel Paths

The mass media are tempting targets: they are big, they are conspicuous, they are easily distorted, they invite bright and brittle condemnations—and they do have built-in limitations of their virtues. They have shown themselves inefficient warriors, and on the whole have tended to be too little concerned with what the intellectuals have had to say.

On the other side, the fondest attachment of the intellectuals is to theory not to practice; more importantly, there is among many intellectuals an uncongeniality with some of the basic ingredients of a democratic society and, in many cases, a real distrust of them. Democratic procedures, to some extent even democratic values, necessarily involve quantitative considerations, about which intellectuals are always uneasy. This uneasiness is not restricted to cultural matters. For example, it influences their view of the legislative processes and of economic interplays in our society. The intellectual is highly impatient of much that is imperfect but also inevitable in democracies. But despite these differences between intellectuals and the mass media, I think that they have something in common, that their efforts are fundamentally going toward the same general goal but along different paths.

I take it to be the distinguishing characteristic of civilized man that he is concerned with the environment and destiny of himself and his kind. The end of all scholarship, all art, all science, is the increase of knowledge and of understanding. The rubrics of scholarship have no inherent importance except in making the expansion of knowledge easier by creating system and order and catholicity. The freedom of the arts has no inherent value except in its admitting unlimited comments upon life and the materials of life. There is no *mystique* about science; its sole wonder exists in its continuous

expansion of both the area and the detail of man's comprehension of his physical being and his surroundings.

The ultimate use of all man's knowledge and his art and his science cannot be locked up into little compartments to which only the initiate hold the keys. It cannot be contemplated solely by closeted groups, or imposed from above. If vitality is to be a force in the general life of mankind, it must sooner or later reach all men and enter into the general body of awarenesses. The advancement of the human lot consists in more people being aware of more, knowing more, understanding more.

The mass media believe in the broad dissemination of as much as can be comprehended by as many as possible. They employ techniques to arrest attention, to recruit interest, to lead their audiences into new fields. Often they must sacrifice detail or annotation for the sake of the general idea.

Although it may be presumptuous, perhaps I can suggest a general contrast in the position of the professional intellectual: he feels that knowledge, art, and understanding are all precious commodities that ought not to be diluted. He believes that if things were left to him this dilution would not happen, because the doors of influence would be closed to the inadequately educated until they had earned the right to open them, just as he did. His view is that if standards remain beyond the reach of the many, the general level will gradually rise.

In this respect, I dissent from Mr. Rosten's conclusion that the intellectuals "project their own tastes, yearnings, and values upon the masses."* I do not believe there is such an irreducible gap between the tastes, yearnings, and values of the intellectuals and those of the masses. The difficulty is that the intellectuals do not project at all to the uninitiated. Their hope is to attract them, providing that it is not too many, too fast. They would wait for more and more people to qualify to the higher group, although they themselves want to stay a little ahead of the new arrivals.

This accounts, I believe, for the intellectuals' fear of popularization. The history of the Book-of-the-Month Club illustrates this point. Intellectuals have repeatedly made statements (not entirely characterized by a disciplined array of evidence), that the book club would bring about an "emasculation of the human mind whereby everyone

*Leo Rosten, see page 71.

loses the power of his determination in reading,"[1] and that the club's selections were "in many cases, not even an approximation to what the average intelligent reader wants."[2] Yet a study by a Columbia University researcher found that over an eighteen-year span the reaction of reviewers, critics, and professors to the Book-of-the-Month Club selections was far higher in terms of approval than their reaction to random samples of nonselections.[3]

By comparing the two heaviest book selections of the club in 1927 to their two lightest ones in 1949 (without other evidence) Stanley Edgar Hyman suggests that the standards of selection are deteriorating.* Yet he makes no mention of the fact that in 1949 the Book-of-the-Month Club for the first time in its history distributed a serious contemporary play, *Death of a Salesman*, that it distributed a serious discussion of a vital issue in Vannevar Bush's *Modern Arms and Free Men*, that it put into hundreds of thousands of homes William Edward Langer's *Encyclopedia of World History*, that it brought to its subscribers George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-four*, Winston Churchill's *Their Finest Hour*, and A. B. Guthrie's Pulitzer-Prize novel, *The Way West*.

Let me press what Mr. Hyman regards as evidence of "deterioration" of the Book-of-the-Month Club selections to the conclusion at which he himself arrived, that in the decade since 1949 "the selections seem to have continued to deteriorate." Even a glance at the evidence would refute this slashing generality. Indeed, the books distributed by the club throughout the 1950's suggest some high levels of excellence: in fiction there have been three books by William Faulkner, three by James Gould Cozzens, two by John Hersey, seven plays by Shaw, six by Thornton Wilder, Eugene O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey into Night*, novels by Feuchtwanger, Salinger, Thomas Mann, Hemingway, John Cheever, and James Agee; there have been eight historical works by Churchill, two by Schlesinger, two by Van Wyck Brooks, others by Morison and Nevins, Dumas Malone, Bernard DeVoto, Catherine Drinker Bowen's life of John Adams, Toynbee's *Study of History*, two of Edith Hamilton's studies of ancient Greece, and Max Lerner's *American Civilization*; in poetry, Stephen Vincent Benet, and *The Oxford Book of American Verse;* from the classics, Bulfinch's *The Age of Fable*, Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, the Hart edition of Shakespeare, a new translation of *The Odyssey*, works by

*Stanley E. Hyman, see page 132.

Dostoevsky, Gustave Flaubert, and Mark Twain; in art, Francis Henry Taylor's *Fifty Centuries of Art*, John Walker's *Masterpieces of Painting from the National Gallery*, and *Art Treasures of the Louvre*; in reference works, Fowler's *Modern English Usage*, Palmer's *Atlas of World History*, Audubon's *Birds*, and Evans' *Dictionary of Contemporary American Usage*.[4]

To turn to television, I hear over and over such generalities as, "There is nothing but Westerns on television," or "Television is all mysteries and blood and thunder." Such charges usually come from people who do not look at television, but that does not modify their position. As in the case just cited, there is no uncertainty about this exaggeration; one can look at the actual record.

Let us take by way of example the week of February 15 to 21, 1959, on the CBS Television Network, because that week had nothing exceptional about it. During the preceding week, there were such outstanding broadcasts as Tolstoy's *Family Happiness* and a repetition of the distinguished documentary, *The Face of Red China*. In the following week, the programs included the New York Philharmonic and the Old Vic Company's *Hamlet*. Returning to the unexceptional week of February 15, about 4½ hours, or 1/18 of CBS Television's total program content of 75½ hours, were devoted to Westerns; about 5 hours, or 1/15, were taken up by mysteries. On the other hand, 7¾ hours, or about 1/10 of the total number of hours, were devoted to news and public affairs. Altogether, some 78 percent of the evening programing was occupied by drama, fairly evenly divided among serious, comedy, mystery, Westerns, and romance-adventure.

Looking at the record for the first five months of 1959, I find on the CBS Television Network alone four Philharmonic concerts; 90-minute-long productions of plays by Shakespeare, Barrie, and Saroyan, adaptations of Shaw and Ibsen, full-length productions of *The Browning Version*, Melville's *Billy Budd*, Henry James' *Wings of the Dove*, Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, and many distinguished original dramas; thirteen conversations with people of such diverse minds and talents as James Conant, Sir Thomas Beecham, and James Thurber; nine historic surveys of great personalities or developments of the twentieth century; and nine specially scheduled programs inquiring into major issues in public affairs, such as the Cuban revolution, the closing of integrated high schools, statehood for Hawaii, and the Geneva Conference.

I am citing these for two purposes. One is to show how, by using selected examples, it can be as easily proved that television is exclusively instructive as that it is exclusively diverting. My other purpose is by way of considering a practical response to the complaints that the intellectuals voice about all the mass media.

What do the intellectuals really want? Do they want us to do *only* serious programing, only programs of profound cultural value? Or do they just want us to do more? And if so, what is more? Do they want the Book-of-the-Month Club to distribute only heavy reading, or just more? Does the club do harm because it has included books of humor among the thirty to forty selections, alternates, and dividends it distributes each year? Is there any serious belief anywhere that among the paperback books we ought to censor what we consider culturally insignificant and allow only what we consider culturally enriching? Or do not the intellectuals really want to stake out reserves, admission to which would be granted only on their terms, in their way, at their pleasure?

Television occupies the air waves under the franchise of the American people. It has a threefold function: the dissemination of information, culture, and entertainment. There are different levels and different areas of interest at which these are sought by a hundred and fifty million people. It is our purpose—and our endlessly tantalizing task—to make certain that we have enough of every area at every level of interest to hold the attention of significant segments of the public at one time on another. Therefore we do have programs more likely to be of interest to the intellectuals than to others. We can try to include everybody somewhere in our program planning, but we cannot possibly aim all the time only at the largest possible audience.

The practice of sound television programing is the same as the practice of any sound editorial operation. It involves always anticipating (if you can) and occasionally leading your subscribers or readers or audience. The "mass of consumers" does not decide, in the sense that it initiates programs, but it does respond to our decisions. A mass medium survives when it maintains a satisfactory batting average on affirmative responses, and it goes down when negative responses are too numerous or too frequent. But so also does the magazine with a circulation of five thousand—as the high mortality rate of the "little magazines" testifies. Success in editing, whether a mass medium or an esoteric quarterly, consists in so respecting the audience that one labors to bring to it something that meets an interest, a desire, or a need that has still to be completely filled. Obviously, the narrower and the more intellectually homogeneous

your audience, the easier this is to do; and conversely, the larger it is and the more heterogeneous, the more difficult.

I must dissent from the unqualified charge that "advertisers today . . . exercise their most pernicious influence in television." The basis of this charge is that, while an advertiser buys space in a magazine with no power of choice as to the editorial content of the magazine, on television he allegedly controls both the commercials and what program goes into the time space. The matter is not so simple.

In the first place I categorically assert that no news or public-affairs program at CBS, however expensive to the sponsor, has ever been subject to his control, influence, or approval. There is a total and absolute independence in this respect.

An advertiser in magazines does have the power to associate his advertising with editorial content by his choice of a magazine. If he makes a household detergent, he can choose a magazine whose appeal is to housewives. In television, he can achieve this association only by seeking out kinds of programs, or, more properly, the kinds of audience to which specific programs appeal. This is of course why a razor blade company wants to sponsor sports programs. But this does not mean that the company is going to referee the game or coach the team. In television, for the most part, advertisers are sold programs by networks or by independent producers, somewhat in the sense that space in the magazines is sold by sales efforts based on the kind of audience the magazine reaches. At the same time, we are perfectly aware that in the rapid growth of television the problem of the advertiser's relationship with program content has not yet been satisfactorily solved. It is an area to which we are going to have to devote more thought and evolve new approaches.

I return to a central point: that some sort of hostility on the part of the intellectuals toward the mass media is inevitable, because the intellectuals are a minority, one not really reconciled to some basic features of democratic life. They are an articulate and cantankerous minority, not readily given to examining evidence about the mass media and then arriving at conclusions, but more likely to come to conclusions and then select the evidence to support them. But they are an invaluable minority. We all do care what they think because they are a historic force on which our society must always rely for self-examination and advancement. They constitute the outposts of our intellectual life as a people, they probe around frontiers in their splendid sparsity, looking around occasionally to see where—how

far behind—the rest of us are. We are never going to catch up, but at least we shall always have somewhere to go.

As for the mass media, they are always in the process of trying, and they never really find the answers. They also are the victims of their pressing preoccupations, and can undoubtedly improve their performances, better understand their own roles, learn more rapidly. I feel that intellectuals and the media could really serve one another better if both parties informed themselves more fully, brought somewhat more sympathy to each other's examinations, and stopped once in a while to redefine their common goals. We in the mass media have probably been negligent in not drawing the intellectuals more intimately into our counsels, and the intellectuals, by and large, have not studied the evidence carefully enough before discussing the mass media. The mass media need the enlightened criticism, the thorough examination, of the intellectuals. When the latter are willing to promise these, we shall all make progress faster and steadier.

REFERENCES

1 Edward F. Stevens, cited in Charles Lee, *The Hidden Public* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1958), p. 51.

2 *Ibid.*

3 Joseph W. Kappel, "Book Clubs and the Evaluation of Books," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 1948, *12*: 243-252.

4 For complete selections for 1926-1957, see Lee, *op. cit.*, pp. 161-194.