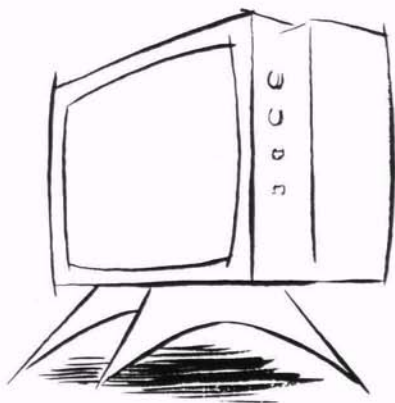


Mass Media Curriculum: Fantasy or Reality?



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YOUNG people are major consumers of the mass media fare. Their appetites for commercial television, magazines, movies, and even newspapers appear to be without limits. The typical youngster spends an average of one-sixth of his waking hours watching television, and by the age of 16 has spent more time in front of a television set than he has in the classrooms of his schools.¹

The movie industry sees young people as the major audience for their products today, either as a member of a family group or with their peers. Recent mergers in the publishing industry give all of the major publishers of monthly periodicals at least one magazine for the "younger set."

However, the bulk of time devoted to the mass media is spent on commercial television. In many ways television is typical of, and reflects the posture of, the other media. All are commercial enterprises and in the final analysis look to the profit sheet for determining success or failure. Their offerings, whether printed or filmed, are similar, and television manages to program much of what is available from the other media. Therefore, many of the following remarks which refer to commercial television are also applicable to other components of the mass media.

The Planned Mass Media Curriculum: Less Than Reality

The mass media offerings can be conceptualized as a curriculum. Using commercial television as a model, there are generally accepted objectives, a body of research knowledge, carefully defined content, scope

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¹ Wilbur Schramm, Jack Lyle, and Edwin B. Parker. *Television in the Lives of Our Children*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, © 1961. p. 30.

and sequence charts, program dissemination strategies based on age groupings, and thorough evaluation procedures.

The mass media curriculum, as planned, produced, edited, and offered to young consumers, is surprisingly simple and direct. On the basis of research and audience reaction, the mass media, and especially the television industry, have a major commitment to fulfilling the fantasy needs of young people. Schramm identified the purposes for watching television in the past decade, and the 1960's have seen the mass media orient their offerings on the basis of his and other research. Schramm states the need of young people for fantasy experiences as the primary reason for watching television, with the need for programs concerning real events a poor second.² These needs, along with some social usage, determine the current strategies behind the offerings of the mass media.

The overwhelming capability to produce fantasy experiences vicariously for all ages and types of children accounts for the majority of time they spend in front of a television set, in a movie theater, or between the covers of a paperback book or magazine. Within their own set of objectives, the curriculum developers of the mass media are successful. It is not possible to overlook the omnipresence of commercial television and the rest of the mass media. A basic fact is obvious that they have identified a low but generally acceptable level of young people's fantasy needs and taste.

The Consumed Mass Media Curriculum: Little More Than Fantasy

The basic commitment tends to influence materials about real events. The curriculum makers of the mass media realize correctly that youngsters carry over their criteria for fantasy consumption to other types of reading and viewing. The young reader or viewer wants reality presented in a fast-paced, exciting, and action-packed manner. Since youngsters get what they want from the mass media, reality-oriented material, even when committed to "telling it like it is," ends up "giving them what they want." The difference does not necessarily subordinate the truth but does allow the young consumer to sit back and be entertained again.

It is obvious that youngsters do change as a result of watching commercial television and utilizing the other mass media. The depth of these changes is largely unexplored and there is a need to seek answers to many basic questions. How have the mass media affected the values of young people? Do the young look more favorably on direct, even authoritarian action and control? Are they so exposed to violence and crime that they are more prone to accept this behavior? Or even to copy it?

In the absence of substantial research data, the position can be taken that the mass media do not influence greatly the basic values of the vast majority of young people. The introduction to books and television early in life on a fantasy-fulfillment basis and the continued expectation to be entertained in this way have, in effect, cut off the mass media from the real developmental process of growing up. There are major exceptions to this generalization, but it appears that value determination continues to center around the core of home, school, peer group, and church. The

² *Ibid.*, p. 170.

influence of the mass media revolves on the periphery and fills in gaps where there is no prior influencing or is selected when leverage is needed to pry loose from imposed restrictions.

Youngsters' reactions to the recent assassinations of three national leaders can serve as an example. Young people were shocked and sickened as were adults with the tragedies. It is interesting to note that the mass media which had brought so much violence and death as fantasy in no way prepared them for the shock of seeing death come to real people. This violence and the subsequent sadness of the families and the entire world did more to show youngsters the true nature of violence than the thousands of hours of fantasy consumption prior to these events.

The real curriculum of the mass media is determined by the individual. The mass media do not command a captive audience of young people. In the case of commercial television, research concludes that:

It seems clear that in order to understand television's impact and effect on children we have first to get away from the unrealistic concept of what television "does to children" and substitute the concept of *what children do with television*.³

Most youngsters use the mass media for relaxation and recreation, but for others it becomes more than fantasy. Aside from matters of taste and style, the impact of the mass media and especially commercial television could be relegated to an unimportant position except that some young people do not use the mass media in ways anticipated by producers and editors. Consumption in these instances is a symptom of deeper problems that should be recognized by school personnel. In some instances too much dependence and too much time are committed to the mass media for vicarious experiences that are unrelated to life.

In other instances the dependence on visual "inputs," whether photographs, films, or video tapes, creates an unrealistic desire for new or different experiences at a faster pace than that at which they are provided in real life. A third pattern is typified by the popularity among lower socio-economic youngsters of situation comedies that take place in middle-class families. Here the planned curriculum of comedy is used as fantasy to compensate for deprived environments.

Fantasy and Reality: Implications and Strategies

The roots for developing strategies for coping with and influencing mass media usage are found in a realistic approach to the whole business. Basic to this is the acceptance of the mass media as a normal, healthy outlet for young people. They do place a wealth of information literally at the fingertips of young people. On the negative side, the mass media are basically anti-intellectual, though this is of their own choosing. They focus on crime, violence, and other baser human acts but usually couch these acts within the womb of fantasy fulfillment. If these facets can be accepted, then the job at hand is to influence the manner in which individuals relate to the mass media.

If the assumption is accepted that a certain amount of mass media usage is normal, then one strategy is to "contain" the quantity of consump-

³ *Ibid.*, p. 169.

tion. This can be done by involving young people in learning or recreational activities that include satisfying interaction with others and opportunities for use of one's own personality in task-oriented situations. This task will not be easy since many youngsters use television to compensate for their reluctance to become involved. These are the shy ones who seldom speak or make contributions to classroom discussions and who are the social and personality "dropouts" in our schools. Teachers and other professionals too often look without concern on this type of behavior and see this docility and compliance as a welcome balance for other more aggressive children. These young people are not receiving the satisfactions of being involved so they "escape" to the fantasy involvement of television and the other media.

It is not feasible to compete for the hours of the day that are spent watching television. But it is possible to enhance the process of being involved through sensitive and consistent structuring of school activities, so that involvement will be able to compete with the projective, vicarious experiences found through mass media consumption.

To achieve meaningful, satisfying involvement for the over-consumers of the mass media who occupy the inconspicuous middle sections of our classrooms, it will be necessary to make basic changes in many typical classroom procedures. Student involvement will result when teachers release their hold on instructional planning and classroom time and let students do some of the important things that go on in any learning situation. Student involvement can occur when the risk-level of the classroom is reduced so that students can share feelings and ideas without fear of embarrassment or condescension.

Obviously, the second strategy would deal with making the young user more sophisticated in his use of the mass media. Young people need the opportunity to experience the mass media as technical, business, social, and artistic entities. The first steps would involve the study of units devoted to developing a body of knowledge about the realities of corporate business and the use of technology in the communications and publishing sectors of the economy. A second step would be the study of the characteristics of the various media and how they are used within our society. A final step would be the development of the concepts of style and taste based on an appreciation of the artistic functions of directing, writing, acting, etc.

In conclusion, the mass media and especially commercial television have largely replaced the comic books of yesteryear. They fulfill a function by providing fantasy experiences for young people and, to a much lesser degree, serve as a window to the world around them. Young people, as a whole, use the mass media as expected with no real adverse effects. Those who do not so use the mass media need the help and concern of school people because misuse of mass media fare is not a discrete phenomenon but is symptomatic of deeper problems. The curriculum of the schools should acknowledge the existence of the mass media by encouraging greater understanding and appreciation of the mass media as a complex and essential enterprise. Perhaps then a start can be made toward changing the "locked-in" habits of the young consumers of the mass media. □

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