

# MASS MEDIA INSTRUCTION: A MISSING LINK?



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"TEACH for relevance!" is a plea often made by members of the educational profession. This advice appears to represent a virtue high in value. Yet, if we match certain of these valued behaviors with educational practice, we are chagrined by the discovery that some of the most verbally valued behaviors are least attended.

Everyone agrees that skills in interpreting and using the mass media are highly relevant to individuals in a world of accelerating information overload, but formal action designed to meet this need is almost nonexistent in our schools. A survey by Father John Calkin of Fordham University reported that while children spent approximately 10,000 hours in the classroom from kindergarten through the 12th grade, during the same period they watched over 15,000 hours of television. Recently, the Coleman Report pointed out that our society is being inundated with information and opinion through the mass media, particularly television. The report further stated that individuals are unable to use this material simply because they are overwhelmed, or because they have not been properly trained to evaluate the mass of information.

We still operate as if the school, the church, and the home are the only major sources of information and values. The truth is two-pronged: not only do these institutions face a strong competitor in television and other mass media, but they, like the mass media, contribute to the vast informational

bombardment, the sorting of which becomes a desperate exercise.

It is often difficult, on the basis of available evidence, to ascribe a particular effect to the mass media, but there is no question that there is an effect. Nicholas Johnson supports this in his conclusion of television's effects:

It is the greatest communications mechanism ever designed and operated by man. It pumps into the human brain an unending stream of information, opinion, moral values, and aesthetic taste. It cannot be a neutral influence.<sup>1</sup>

That school age children are exposed to television is not in question, and there is mounting evidence suggesting that the exposure is inordinate when compared with other competing information sources. It is imperative that schools now reevaluate how they relate to the mass media. Perhaps, instead of dispensing information and values, schools should emphasize skills for sorting out and integrating the variety of values and information that bombard students in our world of instant communication.

The National Goals Research Staff's report, *Toward Balanced Growth: Quantity*

<sup>1</sup> Nicholas Johnson. "What Do We Do About Television?" *Saturday Review* 53 (28): 14-16+; July 11, 1970.

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with *Quality*, reiterated many of the conclusions of the Coleman Report, and also added:

The proportion of information that children receive from the mass media is so large and the range of values to which they are exposed so diverse that it may well be that the schools should be devoted to giving them the cognitive skills for integrating information, and a framework within which to sort out the diverse values to which they are exposed.<sup>2</sup>

A new division of communication arts, presently called visual literacy, is drawing together the threads that will provide the nonverbal instructional component for such message interpretation.

## A Select Few

Fortunately, or unfortunately, decisions commanding the mass media are now in the hands of a select few, and for the most part these few are motivated by financial outcomes rather than the public good. It is likely that this power will continue to be in the hands of a few, and despite the Federal Communications Commission and other governmental controls, the citizenry will continue to have little to say about programming. Yet, if students can be trained to recognize manipulative techniques, and are provided basic knowledge of visual communication, they will be in a much better position to make up their own minds about the merits of the information flooding the mass media.

Except in a handful of schools, *no one in education is attempting to train children or adults to interpret the mass media*. Even the few schools making the attempt only pay token attention to teaching these important skills. This is true, despite our recognition of their importance, and despite the ready availability of a vast reservoir of information relevant to instruction.

To illustrate just one aspect of such a communications curriculum, consider how a knowledge of *propaganda techniques* could

provide the user of mass media with one powerful tool for judging the merits of information. These 10 illustrative propaganda techniques are easily understood, but they require practice to make them functional. A few evenings of practice in front of the television set can soon make a child or an adult expert in recognizing most of these techniques.

For those interested in pursuing the subject, there are a number of volumes which treat propaganda techniques in detail. An excellent section for those just beginning is found in Frank B. May's book, *Teaching Language as Communication to Children*. In one section of his book he elaborates considerably on the illustrative techniques presented here. The examples that follow each of the techniques are only representative, but they should provide a model for identifying other instances of the same technique.

### PROPAGANDA TECHNIQUES

1. *Appealing to authority*—"Doctors agree . . .," "Mom says . . .," "Thomas Jefferson said . . .," etc.

2. *Bandwagon approach*—"All the other kids are doing it," "My neighbors have one," "More people buy Crashmobile than . . .," etc.

3. *Transfer technique*—accomplished primarily through association; examples would be a pretty girl using toothpaste, public figures giving product testimonials, etc.

4. *Labeling*—"Hopeless, hysterical, hypochondriacs, radical, liberals," preventive war (instead of aggression), etc.

5. *Ego building*—"You will choose only the best," "Gentlemen of discriminating taste . . .," etc.

6. *Identification*—"I'm Italian, too," "See how honest I am," "It's amazing how our tastes coincide," etc.

7. *Oversimplification*—(for lazy thinkers) "In your heart you know he's right," "You can't fight bad luck," etc.

8. *Image making*—"You'll feel devilish in the Ford Demon," "I'd rather fight than switch," "You're in safe hands when you elect Governor (father image) . . .," etc.

9. *Hypnotism*—mild forms of trance in-

<sup>2</sup> National Goals Research Staff. *Toward Balanced Growth: Quantity with Quality*. Washington, D.C.: Superintendent of Documents, U.S. Government Printing Office, 1970. p. 97.

duced through smooth, resonant verbiage, often through repetition of some phrase or key word: "Of the people, by the people, and for the people," "Sleep, sleep, sleep with Sominex," etc.

10. *Sophistry*—use of half truths, fallacious arguments, and misleading implications. "Research proves that our product is better (better than what?)," "Wash the gray right out of your hair" (instead of "dye your hair"), etc.<sup>3</sup>

Awareness that such techniques are being used certainly aids the viewer in discounting their effects, and in making judgments based on other more objective factors. While television is emphasized here, it should also be realized that other members of the mass media use such techniques, as well. A cursory examination will find similar persuasive content in radio, journals, and newsprint.

## Instant Reporting

Newspapers and journals, for technological reasons, do not have television's advantage of instant reporting. Their news is always several hours old and sometimes days or months old. We know that the passage of time has a cooling effect on the impact of news. Watching a rerun of yesterday's football game is not nearly as exciting as watching it at the time it is happening. For this reason, readers tend to be somewhat more objective toward the information in journals and newsprint. However, technology is rapidly cutting away at the time lag between the occurrence of an event and its publication in print.

Thanks to the computer and a number of photographic and mechanical processes, it is now technically possible for an editor to take the news as fast as the copy gets to him and compose it on a console in his office. This is much faster than the wearisome, time-consuming layouts of the past. As another example of technological effect, it can be expected that the equally time-consuming means of newspaper delivery will not long continue. The technology for delivering the

newspaper through a number of possible homeowned readout machines via telephone lines exists now, and we are assured this will be available to the public as soon as such techniques are economically feasible—a few short years at most. A newspaper at that time will probably be much smaller, because technology promises custom tailoring of each newspaper that will include only those sections and items that interest the individual subscriber. However, it is suspected that subscribers will continue to get a full share of advertising and slanted information, unless our economical and political systems make radical changes.

The ability to select and retrieve information quickly promises to be one of the most powerful and important contributions of technology for a society that is increasingly dependent on its need for diverse information. Yet in order to make efficient and meaningful use of information, citizens require the necessary skills for interpreting information, whether it be visual, audio, or cursive in nature.

To this end, schools must be encouraged to develop formal instruction designed to train students in interpreting the mass media, both print and nonprint. Strategies for encouraging this change might include gaining the support of some agency like the U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare which could provide necessary financial support and structure for developing a national curriculum designed to train citizens in the language and techniques of the mass media. The placement of such training needs to be considered carefully. Perhaps it could be integrated in some of the existing courses in the school structure (for example, social studies), or perhaps the problem warrants a course of its own. A few schools are adopting courses dealing directly with communication techniques.

Regardless of the strategy or strategies adopted, the time for action is now. A citizen without adequate skills for interpreting the mass of information that he must deal with cannot be expected to make the kind of objective decisions necessary to support a democratic way of life. □

<sup>3</sup> Frank B. May. *Teaching Language as Communication to Children*. Columbus, Ohio: Charles E. Merrill Publishing Company, 1967.

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