

Mass Media: The Hidden Curriculum

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Sharp, insistent questions must be answered by today's educators concerning the structure of our communication environments. Even with such answers it is a long way to our goal: a healthy ecology of lifelong learning. Yet we must begin such a journey.

WHAT would you say is the most significant thing you learned from watching television last night—or last month, or last year? Was it something you saw, perhaps, on the 7 o'clock news—for example, the taking of the *Mayaguez*? Maybe it was something of more personal concern—like Rhoda's marriage. Or perhaps it dealt with matters even closer to home—like the effectiveness of Scope in removing greasy oil (or is it “ring around the collar”?).

Unfair, you may say. I've loaded the case by picking trivial examples. After all, we also learned about the paintings of 18th century Romantics, the voyage of Darwin's *Beagle*, and the slow death of the whale. Agreed. And there's little doubt that information on such topics in interesting, provocative, even—perhaps—important. But significant for lifelong learning? Hardly. Not if we mean by “significant” and “lifelong” learning that shapes our most basic perceptions, feelings, and values, that ingrains in us certain habits of mind.

Such learning is rarely accomplished through the *content* of a medium, no matter how subtle and sophisticated that content may be. This is true whether the medium for learning is an environment like the classroom or an environment like television: their significance is not in the explicit messages they carry, but in the underlying *structure* they impose on our perceptions, attitudes, and behavior. So if we want to know what is the import of television, or of any medium, for lifelong learning, we must avoid the temptation to address the content of particular programs and focus instead on the hidden curriculum: the structure of media.

How Does It Organize Time?

Let's take, for example, television. One of the most productive questions we can ask about the structure of a medium—*any* medium—is: How does it organize time? To start with the most obvious answer, television organizes time, for the most part, in 10- to 60-second, and 30- or 60-minute blocks. And by far the largest proportion of television programming, by type, is in the 10- to 60-second category. I am referring, of course, to the commercial. We see something like six to twelve commercials, each a

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minute or less in length, for every half hour of dramatic programming on television, or twelve to thirty for every hour-length show.

These figures are themselves interesting, but it is not the proportion of commercials to story that is of main concern to us here. What is of main concern is the structure of the commercial message. For each is, in itself, a mini-drama. Typically, we are confronted with some serious social problem (girl wants boy's affection), a crisis (boy rejects girl), a turning point (girl's roommate gives her a bottle of Scope), and the resolution of the problem (girl uses Scope and wins boy)—all within 30 seconds.

I want to stress here that the problems resolved in TV commercials are not trivial ones. Advertisers know their business better than that. Commercials deal, at the gut level, with fears of alienation, rejection, embarrassment, social and even economic disaster. And their message—repeated 12 to 30 times every hour—is that such problems are easily solved, literally within seconds. Program content reinforces the same message on a somewhat larger scale. Murders are committed and solved, wars threatened and averted, justice confounded and vindicated, all in the space of 30 or 60 minutes.

Television is, in short, an extraordinarily *time-compressing medium*. And, in a not-so-subtle way, it reorients our attitudes toward problems and the time required for their solution. It is no accident, I think, that our tolerance for complex and long-term solutions to social problems has steadily declined in the last two decades. The time structure of television has reshaped our expectations, and when real life fails to conform to those expectations, we react with frustration, anger, and despair. One of the reasons for the mounting public loathing of the war in Vietnam, I suspect, was that, by television standards, it simply took too long.

What Are the Sources of the Human Problems?

A second structural characteristic of any medium is what I would call its *metaphysics*. Every communication environment

has a metaphysical bias—that is, a set of underlying assumptions about the sources from which human problems arise and a set of assumptions about how they may be resolved. The metaphysical bias of the church, for example, is that human problems have their source in moral weakness and may be resolved through confession, prayer, faith, and good works. The metaphysical bias of academic scholarship, and of science at its best, is that human problems have their source in ignorance and may be resolved through empirical knowledge and rational thought.

And the metaphysical bias of television? Well, consider, for a moment, "Ring Around the Collar." Whence arises this social problem so grave that it stops parties dead in their tracks and turns vacation dreams to dust? To what can we attribute the stop-action paralysis of our heroes? It's not human greed or carelessness, ignorance or sloth that causes problems in the metaphysics of television. It's an organized but faceless evil force, a Manichaeian devil, personified in rings around collars, Mr. Dirt in your engine, hammers in your head, gremlins with sledges to give your stomach "the old one/two." Problems don't originate or develop on television. They *strike*. The victims of the Manichaeian devil, of course, strike back—with such force that the problem of evil, no matter its origins, is solved in 30 seconds. And their weapon? Scope (once in the morning and once at night). It's not good works or introspection or rationality that resolves human problems in the metaphysics of television. It's technology—personified in a bottle of Scope, tiny time pills, a giant hand in your washing machine, a white tornado, the Man from Glad.

So there in a nutshell is the metaphysical message of television: Problems are not something human beings create; they are something done to us by outside forces—by *them*. But they are always resolvable through technology. This is the message, you understand, not just of commercials. Dr. Welby and Kojak, the Rookies and Mannix, the Protectors and the Six Million Dollar Man are all bedeviled by evil that originates out-



side themselves. And they all triumph through technology—better guns, better cars, better equipment, better pills, better machines.

When this is the lesson the average American is learning six hours a day (according to latest reports), can it surprise anyone that it should carry over into our personal and political lives?

The response of most Americans to the taking of the Mayaguez provides, I think, a case in point. There is ample evidence to suggest that the incident was more a product of ordinary human blundering—faulty communication on the one side and adolescent muscle-flexing on the other—than it was the sinister act of some well-organized evil force. And we have equally ample experience to suggest that the incident might have been resolved with far less loss of life had we opted for the somewhat more time-consuming solutions offered by conventional diplomacy. But most of us, according to the polls, preferred the Manichaeian construction of the event, and the instantaneous, technological solution. We chose, in short, the television construct of reality. The point is that none of us, no matter how well-schooled or symbolically sophisticated, can entirely escape the perceptual reconditioning involved in adapting to a medium like television. And there is no question that we *do* adapt.

What Is Real and What Is Not?

But surely, you may object, we know the difference between experience as it is filtered through the structure of television and the experience of our own lives. We know the difference between fantasy and reality. In my view, there is almost no

proposition *less* certain. For a myriad of reasons having to do with the structure of electronic media, the distinction between what is real and what is not is rapidly breaking down. One of those reasons has to do simply with the proliferation of new communications media in the past half century. It is not just that the number of such media has doubled, tripled, quadrupled within our own lifetime, but the quantity of symbolic messages carried on each has multiplied almost beyond counting.

The point is that we are living today as much, if not more, in a symbolic environment as we are in a sensory one. And it is very much an open question which environment, for most of us, is what we mean by *real*. Last year at this time, I couldn't get space on a flight to California for Christmas; the airlines were booked solid at \$380 a seat, a month in advance. We couldn't get a table for Thanksgiving dinner at Luchow's; their reservation list showed a full house. Half our students came back from the holidays with Florida or Puerto Rico or Arizona tans. But all the messages of my symbolic environments said we were in a depression, that money was tight, that nobody was spending. Which should I trust? The evidence of my own limited senses, or the infinitely more powerful senses of the media? Which is the illusion, and which reality?

A generation ago, Korzybski and the general semanticists offered a suggestion for maintaining sanity that made much sense. Symbol systems are like maps, they said, and reality the territory they represent. If you want to navigate life without disaster, always check the map against the territory, the symbol system against the evidence of your senses. A good prescription in the old days, I'm not sure it works any more. How shall I know if that walk on the moon was fact? How shall I know if Vietnam is over? How shall I know if inflation is growing or waning? There is no territory, no sensory experience against which to check our media maps, in today's symbolic environment. The best we can do is check map against map against map—ABC against NBC against the *Times* against the *US News and World Re-*

port. And if they all agree? Well then, that is the official definition of reality. Certainly, it is the only definition of reality that counts. Walter Cronkite tells us, every evening, that *that's* the way things were today. And how are we to doubt it, when ABC and NBC and the *Times* and the *Daily News* all agree?

Now, I don't want to sound like a Manichaeon, myself. There is no media conspiracy to shape our perceptions to the same mold. What does it is the structure of our symbolic environments. Most of our "information" media are mass media; they are costly to operate, and they have a limited number of channels on which to address us. This means that they must give us that version of reality that has the greatest "relevance" to the largest number of people. And *that* means that the reality we get is at the highest level of abstraction. What is important, in the wide-angle view of the mass media, is people and events of statewide, national, and international significance. And there are relatively few sources for information about doings at those levels. So, no matter which map you look at, it all comes out pretty much the same.

And here is the sad paradox of mass communication: Because its structure requires it to be relevant to all, it ends up being relevant to none. The function of information, in theory, is to increase our control over our own lives. But mass information is about events so far removed from our own experience that there is little or nothing we can do to affect or even verify them. And so we feel, not informed, involved, in command of our destinies, but helpless, hapless, alienated.

A Healthy Ecology of Lifelong Learning

Now, for all it may seem, this is not a jeremiad against mass media. For all their power, they are but one element in the ecology of symbolic environments that shape our learning. There is nothing inherently evil about the metaphysics of television or the abstraction bias of mass media, just as there is nothing inherently evil about deer, or

wolves, or even potato bugs in the natural environment. Each has its vital purposes, so long as the total environment is balanced. The greatest danger to our intellectual and social survival is not that the electronic media, with their emphasis on instantaneity, the here-and-now, technological solutions, and Manichaeon metaphysics, will continue to *grow*, but that the institutions which ought to serve as counter-forces will collapse.

The reason for the threat is simple enough: Nothing sells like success. Do Americans prefer television heroes to political figures? Then let's package Gerald Ford like Marcus Welby. Do children attend more intently to their television sets than to their classroom teachers? Then let's package classroom learning like Sesame Street. The temptation to remake our schools in the image of electronic technology is a strong one, the path is easy, and we're much farther along it than you might believe.

The path to establishing a healthy intellectual climate—a balanced ecology of lifelong learning—is a different one. It requires that we preserve, at all costs, the integrity of our various institutions for learning, and promote the differences among them. This means that our first responsibility is to educate ourselves in the structure of media, including our personal relationships, our schools, our technologies. And that means we need to design a whole new set of questions to ask.

Some of those questions I've already suggested here: How does the environment, the medium, organize time? What are its metaphysics? At what level of abstraction does it operate? What are its sensory biases? To these we might add, How does it organize space? What are its patterns of information flow? What does it make us do with our bodies? How does it organize our relationships with each other? The most urgent responsibility facing all of us, as educators, must be to define and to answer questions like these about the structure of our communication environments. It is a long way from there to our goal: a healthy ecology of lifelong learning. But then, even the longest journey must start with a single step. □

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