

GEORGE GERBNER

mass communication and the humanization of homo sapiens

WE LIVE at a time when the impact of three revolutions is changing the shape of human affairs. The industrial revolution transformed man's material relation to man, society, and nature. The nuclear revolution has made traditional intercourse among nations obsolete. And with the communications revolution the industrial and scientific revolutions have exploded into the cultural sphere.

To take the full measure of the cultural transformation of our time we have to go back to the ice age. For at least a hundred million of the last 101 million years, lush forests covered the land from the Arctic Circle and through the Sahara Desert to the Antarctic. Arboreal existence in damp tropical forests freed the forearms of one group of mammals from having to support the burden of the body and exigencies of life shaped the forearms of some rather underpowered primates into strong, sure, delicate instruments. Millions of years of human evolution are compressed in the word "comprehend": It stems from the expression "grasp with the forehand." Exceptionally deft manipulation required an exceptionally large and complex control system: The brain.

The last million years have robbed hominoids of their arboreal "paradise." Periodic invasions of glaciers sent them roving into all habitable parts of the globe. Huddled in cold valleys which were flooded during warm spells, the featherless and furless, but luckily warm-blooded, creatures were hard-pressed to develop resources of collaboration, community, and communication.

Only the hominoid brain could regulate the body, respond to the immediate environment, and still

The author of this article is associated with the Institute of Communications Research at the University of Illinois.

retain reserve capacity and the mechanical calm necessary to holding an image long enough to reflect on it, store it, and retrieve it in the

form of messages. This is the prerequisite for human communication: Interaction through messages.

Forced to taste the fruits of new types of knowledge, the hominoid survived by transforming himself into *Homo sapiens*. Give Neanderthal Man a shave, a haircut, and an Ivy League suit (says Isaac Asimov) and he could walk down Fifth Avenue without anyone doing a double-take. Be that as it may, *Homo sapiens* emerged from the ice age a pretty accomplished artist, scientist, and administrator. And this is what he had to be.

Humanizing Functions

His art in communication was the shaping of sounds, forms, and images into messages which made the truths of the tribe believable and compelling. His communication science was the equally important (and usually more risky) attempt to make beliefs truer by contemplating and assessing alternatives (*Which end of a burning stick can be seized with impunity? Is the earth really flat? What, or who, is the center of the universe?*). Administration in communication has been the organization of message systems into coherent structures of magic, ritual, myth, education, and government.

These functions have played a unique role in human transformation. They make the ability to interact through messages THE HUMANIZING PROCESS of the species: The cultivation of assumptions about life, society, and the world; the production and perception of messages bearing man's notions of what is, what is IMPORTANT, and what is RIGHT.

The common elements of this humanizing process derive from the common culture. The everyday

popular culture of man provides the context, the raw materials, and much of the substance from which to record, represent, and re-create aspects of the human condition, widen the scope of consciousness beyond the reach of the senses, and extend a vision of human potentials (and the requirements for their fulfillment) beyond that of any other living species.

For a long time the messages and images which composed the fabric of popular culture were largely woven by tribe and village out of the same homespun yarn of everyday experience which also gave rise to folkways of rearing, teaching, and preaching. The process was all interpersonal. It was slow-moving and fixed as long as the local and limited circumstances which governed it were fixed.

It was perpetuated via the oral tradition. This was infinitely adjustable to time, place, circumstance, and function, yet it could span a century in one telling of a tale heard from one's grandfather and told to one's grandchild. The common culture in which man learned to think and act *human* was seen as just a part of God's universe, like the air in which a young bird must learn to act like a bird.

Slowly things began to change. More and more people became increasingly aware of cultural influences not of their own tribe or village. *It became apparent that the common culture was not an act of God or nature but a man-made system of messages and images, that the system itself cultivated ways of rearing, teaching, and preaching, as well as of learning.* We can now see that the everyday popular culture which surrounds us is the medium in which we learn to think and act human. But it is more than the air in which a bird learns to fly. The man-made medium of popular culture cultivates the particular kinds of humanity which characterize large groups of people and distinguish them from other large groups.

Mass Production of Culture

Thinking about the process of humanization through a man-made system of messages may trap us in "chicken-or-egg"-type dilemmas. But when we find that certain things go together (and that their relationship is not accidental), we can usually conclude that changing any one of the elements will change the complexion of the whole. So the real question becomes not what comes first, but what significant elements of total cultural situations can be made most responsive to man's will.

A change in man's relationship to the common culture marks the transition from one epoch to another in the way members of our species are humanized. The rate of this change has increased (and the life-span lengthened) to such an extent that different generations living side by side may now be human-

ized in different ways and live in essentially different (but overlapping) cultural epochs. For when the industrial revolution burst into the cultural sphere, after a long, slow build-up, instead of the age-old process of filtering-down and person-to-person transmission of most that ever comes to a human we had mass production. This meant almost simultaneous introduction of information, ideas, images, and products at all levels of society, at least potentially, in all inhabited parts of the globe.

The shared communicative context of messages and images through which a community reveals to its members the varieties, limitations, and potentials of the human condition is no longer woven out of any homespun yarn of private everyday experience. Nor could it be. Even the significance of "everyday experience" has changed. *Much of our behavior is in response to things we only know about (or don't even know about) but never really "experience."* What happens in Moscow, Tokyo, Havana, Washington, Berlin, New Delhi, or London; what happens in art, science, technology, medicine, education, or public administration: All these and many other constantly changing relationships affect us quickly and profoundly. *And the fabric of popular culture which relates these elements to one another and structures the common consciousness toward existence as a whole is now itself largely a manufactured synthetic product.* How shall we evaluate all this?

Opportunities and Hazards

Mass communication and the mass media are cultural arms of a *system of mass production* rather than mysterious reflections of any "mass mind" or "mass man." Mass communication is an inseparable part of industrial society. Some sort of "mass culture" is a requirement for any popular self-government. All these things are, in my view, not only necessary but *desirable*. They are essentially liberating forces, forces of abundance and richness, of a better life for more people. These are things I *want*.

And so is the splitting of the *atom*. I want its life-giving powers, though I don't want its death-dealing bombs. I want these forces seen for what they are and used in full awareness of what they do.

The real effect of mass communication and culture is not so much in what we *do* as in what we *become*. Mass media cannot mechanically dictate decisions. But by cultivating common assumptions of *what is, what is important, and what is right*, they do structure the issues to decide *about* whether we agree with their point of view or not. They can set the stage, arrange the climate, and shape the collective outlook in which most private and public decision-making goes on.

The greatest opportunities often involve the greatest hazards. When a few distant media of mass communication can expose most people in most places to most of the same cultural influences at the same time, the stakes are indeed very high. Mass production and distribution of communications to scattered, heterogeneous national and world communities means potential enrichment of cultural horizons and increased life chances incredible by all previous standards.

But in an age of mass-produced abundance and mounting "surpluses," hunger and ignorance and want are no longer "natural" conditions of man's existence. The profitable cultivation of superstition, bigotry, selfishness, and misanthropy now becomes a "rationally" planned *manufacturing* process.

The Challenge

Most popular representations of what is, what is important, and what is right roll off collective assembly lines bearing a brand name or a corporate image. Industrial armies mass-produce views of life, society, and the world designed to fit a marketing approach, the cold war, or a twenty year plan and under the command of General Motors, General Foods, General Mills, or a General Secretary of the Cultural Council of Some People's Socialist Republic.

If war is too serious a business to be left to generals, or to be made a by-product of other activities and ambitions, so are the humanizing processes of mass-produced popular culture. But can we have it any other way?

Not being fully aware of the basic changes that occurred as we coasted on eighteenth century slogans into the second half of the twentieth century, we have hardly *explored* any alternatives. But we cannot have the cake of mass production and still persist in the illusion that we are eating the fruits of free individual enterprise. Major policy decisions will have to be made and I think very soon.

The only standards of value I can find are inherent in the communication functions of science, art, and administration independent of other interests. These functions indicate to me the positive humanizing values of making beliefs truer, such truths as we have more believable, and mass-produced knowledge both more responsible and freer.

The problem of mass communication is lively and urgent today because it focuses attention not only on the kind of society we want to have but also on the type and range of our own humanity we want to have. If any.

We have changed the traditional process of humanization and, with that, the very shape of history. It now becomes necessary to write our history *before* we make it; there are not likely to be any historians to analyze what we *should have done*. The snowballing effects of the three revolutions force us to marshal again new resources for collaboration, community, and communication. But this time the challenge is of our own making. It is a challenge to citizens of a self-governing society to explore more deeply the condition of man and the prospects and alternatives of humanization in a mass-produced culture. I think we should welcome that challenge and prepare to meet it.