

## THE MASS MEDIA IN AMERICAN CULTURE

*Taher A. Razik*

*A graduate of the Institute of Education, Ain Shams University, Cairo, Egypt, the author taught in Egypt and for four years served as director of the National Museum of Kuwait as a member of the Egyptian Educational Mission to the Middle East. In the United States since 1958, he is a research assistant in the Bureau of Educational Research and Service at Ohio State University. He is writing his dissertation on the subject of creativity for a Ph.D. in audiovisual education.*

A STRANGER in an American city need make no more than a five-minute stop to be easily convinced that American civilization is a mass-media culture par excellence. If he stays longer, he will soon realize that it is becoming more, rather than less, so. If the American himself is not conscious of this, it is not because he has not been so informed, for, along with other phases of mass production, these media are constantly being “pointed to with pride” or “viewed with alarm”—both with some reason.

The technical excellence which goes into the construction of the instruments of communication and their continuous improvement are generally singled out with pride; the content, quality, or design of the message conveyed by the instrument creates the alarm.

The mass media boom now taking place in Western Europe will probably go a long way toward proving that the problems which exist are not strictly American, but are inherent in the nature of the media. Technological progress allows almost everyone to possess the instruments, and every such improvement puts more instruments into the hands of a greater number of people—people whose interests are supposedly cruder, less trained, simpler, and more childish as the bottom of what we call the socioeconomic barrel is approached.

Countries in which far-reaching censorship is a normal practice (and even some democratic countries in which broadcasting is more or less a government monopoly) can easily subsidize either political propaganda—as in Russia or Cuba—or media presentations con-

sidered to be of good quality without paying undue attention to popularity ratings, as the British "Third Program" and its imitators attempt to do. But in parts of the world where the value of a given message (newspaper, film, etc.) is judged entirely on the basis of the number of persons constituting its audience, one is likely to find the general level of the fare mediocre or worse.

In the United States, advertisers who purchase radio-TV time try to outdo each other in the speed, glibness, and effectiveness with which they can present an acceptable image of "the average American."

Often based on the findings of commercial audience research organizations, the average American (male) is generally depicted as a moderately successful man, very extroverted, overflowing with good humor, and extremely naïve—especially in his response to mass media. He lives in a small, but bright, clean, and cheerful frame house in the suburbs, almost indistinguishable from the house next door. He parks, in the driveway, a late-model car whose condition is of considerable concern to him. He is a white-collar worker of some mysterious variety, since he always wears a white shirt and tie and occasionally mutters something about the importance of "getting the 'Blank' contract." He cannot enjoy his breakfast because it coincides with the arrival of the morning newspaper. A few minutes later, on his way to work, he will continue to soak up news, predigested for him by some commentator, over his car radio (cheap transistor sets have permitted the spread of this practice to buses as well) until he arrives at his office. Once at work, he is assumed to be free from the media until he returns home to relax lazily

before his TV set in the evening. There may or may not be an evening paper.

While this man is away at the office, his wife supposedly has the time to catch up on the latest in the TV soap opera series, as her electrical push-button machines do the bulk of her washing, cooking, and house-cleaning chores. Over her TV or radio outlet, national manufacturers inform her of the latest improvements in household equipment, and local advertisers tell her where she can get these for "less."

The children of this couple are not as yet interested in soap, washing machines, shaving cream, or golf clubs, but they must eat something relatively harmless for breakfast, and advertisers have learned that most American children visit the supermarkets with their parents. The clown, cartoon, and "little animal" programs, generally televised between 3:30 p.m. and suppertime, have been chosen to attract this group. Children are informed by their cartoon friends that they can procure pictures of them—or masks, stories, and the like—on the back of a certain cereal box. A great deal of advertising is presented directly to the children in this way.

Advertisers seem to be succeeding in spite of the fact that a great deal of fun is made of commercials in general—in some cases, the producer of the program is allowed (perhaps encouraged) to make light of the sponsor's product. In many families commercial interruptions are used by members of the family to leave the room, make telephone calls, empty ashtrays, or prepare food or drinks to be consumed while watching the remainder of the program. Yet advertisers still seem to sell their goods, perhaps because one must buy either *this* or *that* brand or none. One wonders

what would happen if all products ceased advertising simultaneously.

It is possible to believe that the American (average or otherwise) has found at least a partially successful psychological defense against this barrage, since he cannot escape it altogether. It is doubtful that his reflexes, his logic, or the nature of his responses have been drastically affected, although he probably loses a great deal of psychic energy in repelling these attacks, energy which might otherwise be used for productive purposes. Advertising can reach nuisance proportions, but there are more dangerous attitudes developed by the mass media.

The free flow of information, commentary, and fantasy available at the flick of a switch creates a pleasant, cozy, seminarcotic atmosphere which rarely enlists the active cooperation of the individual, but instead threatens to make him completely passive. What he reads in the paper or views on television which does not lead to some independent thought or behavior on his part tends to do this, but there is a kind of frustration often created by the mass media, which only superficially resembles this passivity. Any book, for example, which makes a public impression is likely to be seized upon, condensed, advertised, quoted, excerpted, lectured about, and dissected by TV or radio panels, even before the un-average American (who is not necessarily passively disposed toward such matters) has had the opportunity to visit the bookshop. Treated in this fashion, even some extraordinarily worthwhile books are "too soon alive" and "too soon dead," simply because serious reading is not done at break-neck speed. Contrast also the critiques of books, plays, music, etc., which ap-

pear in the morning paper, and which are presumably written in a few hours of the previous night with critiques (sometimes of the same book, etc., by the same critic) which, it seems, generally appear in book form and are written at the author's leisure. In the first instance, the book suffers from being cast into a time pattern that is strange to it. The reader suffers, too, and may feel that he has no time to read it; he has seen the movie or has sampled what *Time* has said about it. Whatever the excuse, he probably feels that somehow he and the book he had intended to read do not exist in the same time world. He may have procured the book at the height of all the clamor about it, only to find that it had become a dead issue, untimely or obsolete before he had digested the preface.

Here, passivity is merely relative; the would-be reader is not necessarily more lazy or more lacking in energy than his father or grandfather. What appears to be passivity is often caused by the fact that the speed of the recording and the speed of the transmission of the recording of events have reached or passed the limits of human response.

Devices such as printing presses and automatic binders with their time-collapsing capabilities are to be valued for their positive functions in the service of human life and happiness, but they can help only when they are brought into a range receivable by humans. In this problem of machine speed vs. human speed, the United States still leads the world, but there is nothing specifically American about the situation. Other civilizations will have to face it when their mass media systems reach sufficient numbers and a similar level of efficiency.

There is a response to certain mass-media presentations which better deserves to be called passivity. The passive man allows others to do his thinking and and his choosing for him. There may be several degrees of passivity. He may grumble in his own living room about the terrible quality of the programs on television, but not write the station a nasty letter about it. He may be too passive to grumble, or his passivity may be nothing but tolerance carried to an extreme. The trouble with passivity is not that the viewer surrenders himself willingly to being entertained pleasantly for an hour or two by a TV show. The trouble is that after watching television, he does not get out of his easy chair refreshed, relaxed, and energetic enough to resume active participation in the affairs of the world about him. Passivity cultivates passivity, and the passive reader, viewer, or listener tends to carry the trait with him, even in the face of danger to himself, his family, or his country or in the presence of opportunities whose benefits he will miss because of it.

What can those who manage the mass media do about passivity except help to foster it and exploit it? They might let the audience suggest some of the answers. They might be content to give the facts as they are known and let the viewer make the interpretations. They might try to be subtle enough to create a little intellectual challenge, and they might look for new forms of presentation and employ them without apology. They might assume that the people who con-

stitute the audience are their intellectual equals—at least long enough to see what happens.

A very serious and often justified charge leveled at the mass media, and at television in particular, is that they have by their contents adversely affected the morals and tastes of the people. They have been accused of putting a halo around sin and crime and of presenting poor models of conduct to young and old alike. Those responsible for the accused media can always answer that they are simply being realistic; that they are attempting only to give a true and accurate account of a state of affairs which they have found existing in the society. It is difficult to prove they are wrong, but it is possible to tell them that if they can improve the state of affairs in the society, they have the right and the responsibility to do so.

The mass media have also defended themselves on the basis that they give the people what they want—that if they did not do this, they would have no audience. The remark made by Gilbert Seldes when he spoke at the Ohio State University's Conference on the Humanities in 1961 seems to dispose of this plea rather adequately: "Audiences," he said, "do not exist per se. They have to be created."

The mass media, one would like to believe, have been and can always be a boon to American society. The leveling off is better than the absence of knowledge, and the level itself can be brought up by the proper use of the mass media in education.