

# The Impact of Mass Media on Education

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*Living and Learning*, the Report of the Provincial Committee on Aims and Objectives of Education in the Schools of Ontario, is an excellent example of how mass media are influencing in a total way what is happening in education.<sup>1</sup> Singularly arresting in shape and design, with splashes of color, excellent photography, and an imaginative use of white space, it alerts the reader to a new look in education even before he begins to read the report. Nor does it deliver less than it promises. The 258 recommendations are made in the belief that

we cannot build a society by looking solely to the past — to the record of what our history has shown us to be; for at any juncture in our history both past and future press equally upon us. Characteristic of our thinking today is our belief in the permanence of change. . . .

Like the men to make the initial landing on the moon, our children must be thoroughly prepared for a destination whose features no one knows at first hand. . . . The achievements of the past are there to orient our

youth; the vision, the speculation and the prediction for the future are there to challenge and excite their minds; it becomes a function of the school to provide that orientation and foster that excitement.<sup>2</sup>

Any realistic evaluation of the cultural environment would lead one to recognize, as did the Committee, the all-pervading influence of mass media on what might be called informal education. In the words of the Committee

[today's child] is daily barraged, enriched and deeply affected by the wonders of the age . . . In the sophisticated society of today, the laws and language of the Industrial Revolution are as obsolete as Fulton's steam engine. The bounties and distractions of modern living have created new values and new ideas, new concepts of time and space, new freedoms and new constraints. . . .

From colors to clothing, from speed to spending, he moves in an environment of constant impact upon his senses . . .

He has seen the launching of astronauts, the funeral ceremonies of Kennedy and Churchill, battles in Vietnam, peace marches and race riots . . . Faced with the presence of hallucinatory drugs, wars, violence, sex, and social pressures, he often finds himself on a turbulent sea of experience for which there are no charts.<sup>3</sup>

How does the educator react to this new electronic environment? One would like to think that he sees in it great possibilities for education and is eager to capitalize on them. But the evidence hardly supports such a sanguine view. Not a few teachers consider the output of mass media as trash; they rarely listen to AM radio; they have more important things to do "than waste time in watching television;" they cannot comprehend why anyone would listen to the Beatles and other similar groups; they consider much advertising a total waste of money and a constantly irritating factor in our society; finally, the less said about comic books and magazines the better. By way of contrast, AM radio is the constant companion of the typical teenager; television claims two full years of his life

by the time he is eighteen; the purchase of new records is an important item in his weekly budget; advertising more often than not presents the world to him as he would like it to be; and specialized magazines and pocket books are geared to his immediate interests and concerns. The educator may continue to believe that the school opens a wide window on the world, but for the student the window more often than not appears to be a one-way mirror, reflecting only what is taking place in a classroom carefully insulated from the real world outside.

Yet within that very classroom some educators are attempting to incorporate new approaches and methods into their teaching. The audio-visual explosion in many school systems is evidence enough of the fact. From elementary school through university, films, film-strips, slides, overhead projectors and educational television programs are the order of the day. If young people today are at home with new media, the educator seems to say, then by all means let us use them. The emphasis seems to be on use rather than on most effective use. A teacher is delighted if he finds a film which will reinforce his own point of view, or which will replace the regular lesson; no discussion follows the screening, nor is the film shown a second time. Yet the teacher may feel he is quite progressive! Another teacher begins each week with the same film because he personally finds it stimulating; a third teacher experiments by playing recordings before class begins; the examples go on and on. Now if audio-visuals are merely gimmicks, then one cannot quarrel with this approach. Nor can one quarrel with teachers' colleges for not incorporating serious study of media into their curricula. But if on the other hand the electronic media have ushered in totally new ways to perception, then only a response on the same level is adequate to meet the challenge. Certainly it will not be met by merely incorporating into the classroom program more audio-visual aids.

At this point it might be appropriate to ask whether the educator considers the student to be a container which is to be filled to the brim with all that the system believes worthwhile and important, or as a light bulb to be turned on. If the former, then the parcelling out of bits of information daily is the answer; if the latter then a totally different approach seems to be demanded. Few educators would agree that students are containers, but in practice

many continue to act as if they were and to insist that there be no tampering with the curriculum. Just as the educator is liable to miss completely the possibilities for education that are everywhere present in the new cultural environment, so too he is liable to be completely closed to the possibility of learning experiences that are totally different from his own. *Living and Learning* puts it this way:

The mixed media approach, so well demonstrated at Expo 67 in the imaginative use of film techniques, raises many old and new questions for learning theorists. The simple Pavlovian Stimulus-Response formula is often found wanting as an explanatory frame of reference. In behavioristic tradition, one picture image, seen by itself, impresses one fact on the mind. But two or three picture images seen simultaneously, and often with continuously changing juxtaposition, conjure up a complexity of ideas and relations in which the whole is clearly more than the sum of the parts. Much more of learning is subliminal than we ever guessed, and such multiple ideas seem to stimulate ideas in the mind. Later, these images can be recognized and retained in varying ways, dependent upon the recipient. The real question of how to evaluate the residue of such experiences has not as yet been answered. It has been suggested that it is primarily a sensory emotional experience, and not intellectual, which brings about changes in attitude rather than changes in philosophies. . . We must remain vigilantly aware of this "blitzing of the mind" approach. . . Father John M. Culkin, Director of the Center for Communications at Fordham University, believes that a mind blitzed is a mind burst open and alert for intellectual combat. Both he and Marshall McLuhan claim that apathy, not stupidity, has been the enemy of intellect in our time, which has led to the posture of detachment and non-involvement which modern education must overcome.<sup>4</sup>

Several ideas here might be underlined! Would it be true to say that students generally read a multi-media presentation with much

greater facility than do their teachers? That they could create their own media presentations in school if given the opportunity and sufficient encouragement? Is it possible that this approach might involve them almost totally as persons in the learning process rather than as computers to store away memorized facts and data? Is it possible that television as a "cool medium" has been involving them from childhood in this total approach to perception and that as a result quite unconsciously they are seeking the same approach in education?

Constant experimentation in the past four years with university and high school students, with teachers and administrators, would lead the writer to conclude that the answers to these questions are in the affirmative. Can anything be done to close the gap between student and educator? One solution, and not the only one by any means, might be to begin "programming for discovery," to begin making much greater use of indirect rather than direct communication. Many pavilions at Expo employed the indirect method of communication with marked success, especially with the young. Basically, it provokes questions by introducing the participant to open-ended experiences. If the viewer becomes involved or "turned on," he begins to seek answers to his questions. In the classroom the teacher becomes a stimulator of curiosity and a resource person instead of being merely a dispenser of packaged information. As the student becomes involved in probing experiences with others, the teacher can direct him towards appropriate research materials. If the teacher is truly imaginative (and very secure!), he could suggest that the student or team of students, as the case may be, might attempt a creative presentation after the initial research was completed. At this point some may feel that this is altogether too idealistic an approach. But it has been successful with university and high school students and has resulted in superior work. Wherever "programming for discovery" has been attempted in a serious way, the total environment of the learning situation changes almost overnight. One course at Loyola has only four orientation lectures during the term; the remainder of the time is spent on individual projects and in consultation with the professor. Students find this approach difficult and unsettling. They are unable to fill their notebooks with outlines of lectures. They are lost without their "Linus Blanket." Gradually, however, they become involved

and as the involvement grows they begin to work much more seriously at the course than at any other in which they are enrolled. Similar experiments have been conducted with great success on the high school level. Surprisingly enough, students will spend hours on para-curricular projects which interest them if they are sufficiently challenged and their curiosity is aroused. One such instance centered around the film "21-87" by Arthur Lipsett of the National Film Board. As an experiment, the writer assigned two students who had never seen the film to produce an audio tape on Psalms 21 and 87, using the same inspiration as had Lipsett. After being assured that they might approach the project in any way they desired, they accepted the challenge. The result was a superb montage of sound, completely contemporary yet exactly faithful to the mood and spirit of the two Psalms. This assignment was voluntary, it was not for credit, yet the students spent more than fifty hours in researching the material and another twelve hours in producing the tape.

Films also can play an important role in "programming for discovery." No longer chosen by the teacher as re-inforcers of his viewpoint or as substitutes for teaching, they can offer a springboard for discussion in which teacher and students together probe their experiences for new and deeper understanding. During the first screening the tendency is to project one's opinions and biases into the film. In the ensuing discussion individual interpretations are challenged and probed, thus offering possibilities for a deeper and broader understanding of this shared experience. A second screening provides an opportunity to examine the points of view that emerged in the discussion, to compare them with one's own and with what the artist is attempting to communicate about man and society, and in the process to grow and become more truly human.

Obviously this approach requires careful preparation on the part of the teacher. He must discover what films are readily available, select and screen for himself the ones he thinks suitable, prepare questions which will stimulate discussion and schedule the films in the best time slots available. Many teachers concede that ideally this is the only valid approach but in practice they tend to disregard it completely because they themselves are not really convinced or because they lack the time for discussion and a second

screening or finally because they see no signs of cooperation or interest on the part of principals or school boards.

Just as the mere screening of films achieves little, so too the incorporation into the curriculum of much of what passes for educational television will only lead to disappointment. Most educational television programs to date have simply dispensed information without in any way attempting to involve the viewer. But, in the words of the Hall-Dennis Report, with careful planning and creative production

it is possible to prepare programs that involve the viewer in a variety of ways — by arousing his curiosity; by helping him to look more carefully at a subject; by transporting him, vicariously, in time and space to far-off events and places; by presenting for him various viewpoints on an issue; by creating situations leading to discussion or reflection; by showing him how to perform a skill; and by providing experiences which enable the viewer to form his own generalisations or conclusions. If educational television is to make its appropriate contribution to practices that emphasize inquiry, discovery, and the pursuit of individual interests, it will be essential that the planning and production of programs be based on this philosophy. Television programs for school use must support the teacher's goal of guiding pupils through inquiry, and must not subvert or compete with this goal by merely presenting packages of information.<sup>5</sup>

While it is true that few educators today exert control over the production of television programs for school use, it seems clear that this will not hold for the future. If educators actually had control today, would they end up by “merely presenting packages of information” or would they program for discovery? A student leader at McGill recently provided what might be the correct answer to the question when he described what is happening today:

We have a 250-year old lecture system “where the teacher writes something on the blackboard and 900 students copy it down. Even if only three people are there copying it down, it's no more than stenogra-

phy. . . Not only are teachers unwilling to change the lecture system, but they won't allow us to make it more bearable." So students have no control over their environment, and no real participation in the learning process.<sup>6</sup>

On this rather pessimistic note we might bring this paper to an end. The cultural environment, learning experiences, and informal learning programs reflect the all-pervasive influence of mass media on society. Education however and the school system seem to have been affected hardly at all, at least in ways that are relevant. Hope for the future seems to lie in enlightened reports like that of the Hall-Dennis Committee and in the television generation which will continue to press for major changes in education at every school level. Perhaps this is the only effective way to combat the "apathy which has led to the posture of detachment and non-involvement" on the part of many educators.

#### REFERENCES

1. *Living and Learning, The Report of the Provincial Committee on Aims and Objectives of Education in the Schools of Ontario*. Toronto: Newton Publishing Company, 1968.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 35.
3. *Ibid.*, pp. 37-39.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 53.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 159.
6. "Student Unrest Blamed on University Policies." *The Montreal Star*, January 9, 1969.



*Values communicated by film are interiorized and become a part of oneself, not simply an extension of the fold that parents and educators use to shield the young from the world.*

Anthony Schillaci, "Film as Environment," *Saturday Review*, December 28, 1968, p. 12.