

AMERICAN MASS COMMUNICATION

The American system of mass communication has three characteristics that distinguish it from other systems:

1. Pervasive influence.
2. Freedom of the press.
3. Big-business journalism.

None of these characteristics is unique. There are other countries with powerful media, other countries with free media, other countries with profit-oriented media. But the United States embodies all three traits to an extent unmatched in the rest of the world.

A fish could no more tell you what it is like to live out of water than an American could tell you what it is like to live without mass communication. As soon as an American child is old enough to distinguish between two different makes of midget racing cars or fruit-flavored brands of toothpaste, he is bathed in a constant stream of messages from radio and television. He approaches the daily newspaper through the comics or sports section; these lead him to comic books and sporting magazines, and then perhaps to more serious books and magazines.

By the time he enters kindergarten, the average American child has already been exposed to hundreds, perhaps thousands of hours of radio and television. He has attended dozens of movies and browsed through scores of children's books. He has cut pictures out of magazines and scowled at the newspaper in unconscious imitation of his daddy. All these experiences have taught him something—something about literacy, perhaps, something about violence, something about America. He is in a real sense a child of the mass media.

For most adults, meanwhile, the mass media constitute the only advanced education they receive after high school or college. It is obvious that the media offer every American a continuous course in modern world history. But it is not so obvious, perhaps, that the very basics of community living come to us through the media: births, weddings, deaths, weather reports, traffic accidents, crimes, sales, elections.

It is hard to imagine an efficient system of democratic government without an equally efficient system of mass communications. Citizens would learn of new legislation only after it passed, and then only if they visited their representative in Washington. Incumbents would probably serve for life, because no challenger could make himself known to the electorate. Corruption would go largely unchecked. News of foreign

affairs would remain the monopoly of the President and his State Department. And on the local level, mayors would be free to run their cities as personal fiefdoms. Political information is political power. Without the mass media to transmit such information, the American people would be powerless.

Dwarfing even the educational and political roles of the American media is their entertainment function. Television offers a seemingly unending stream of westerns, thrillers, comedies, and star-studded specials. Radio spins records and conversation. Newspapers lighten the weight of the news with puzzles, advice to the lovelorn, comics, sports, and back-fence gossip. Books, magazines, and films supply entertainment packages for more specialized audiences. The Number One source of recreational activity of almost every American is the mass media.

Of course the media are pervasive in other countries as well. Transistor radios are always among the first manufactured products to be imported into any underdeveloped area of the world. Newspapers and government-sponsored radio and TV stations follow soon afterward. Nevertheless, few observers would dispute that Americans are more a product of their media than any other people in the world.

The American government was founded on a radical political theory: representative democracy. According to this strange notion, the people of a nation should control the government by electing officials to carry out their will. The mass media necessarily play a central role in representative democracy. It is through the media that the people get the information they need to decide what they want their officials to do. And it is through the media that the people find out if their officials are doing it.

For this reason the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution forbids the government to make any laws "abridging the freedom of the press." When it was first written, this provision was unprecedented. Other governments had assumed the right of the king to put a stop to any publication he deemed damaging to the nation. The American Constitution denied Congress and the President this fundamental right. The only thing that can damage a democracy, so the argument went, is a mass media system in chains. As long as every publisher (though not necessarily every reporter) is free to print whatever he wants to print, the truth will make itself clear, the people will be informed, and the democracy will flourish.

Today, many foreign governments have copied our First Amendment into their Constitutions, and some even practice the freedom they preach. The American government, meanwhile, restrains its media with the laws of libel, obscenity, and privacy, the licensing of broadcast stations, the postal regulations, and so forth.

Despite these limitations, there is no mass media system in the world today that is more free from government interference than the American

system. In recent years, a number of very high officials have attacked the media for "irresponsible" opposition to government policy. Some have interpreted these attacks as attempts to control the press, and so they may be. But it is a testimonial to the almost incredible freedom of the American media that the attacks are limited to speeches and denunciations. The government can *do* little or nothing. The reader need only consult the latest issue of his favorite underground newspaper for fresh evidence of America's freedom of the press.

The purpose of a free press, you will remember, is to ensure that the people will be well-informed. Well, we have a free press. Do we have an informed population? Pollster George Gallup often quotes a survey of college graduates which found that only four in ten could name the two senators from their own state; only half could cite a single advantage of capitalism over socialism; only half had an accurate idea of the population of the United States; and only one in three could list five of the Soviet Union's satellite countries in Eastern Europe.³

The notion that freedom of the press is all that's needed for an informed population is known as the Libertarian Theory. The authors of the First Amendment firmly believed that if every publisher were free to print precisely what he wanted to print, somehow truth would emerge victorious. The only responsibility of the publisher was to tell it the way he saw it. The only responsibility of the government was to leave the publisher alone.

In recent years, many observers have begun to question the Libertarian Theory. In its place they have proposed a Social Responsibility Theory of the press. That is, they argue that the American mass media must recognize their obligation to serve the public—to be truthful, accurate, and complete; to act as a forum for conflicting viewpoints; to provide meaningful background to the daily news; etc. Social Responsibility theorists claim that if the media do not voluntarily live up to their obligations, then they must be forced to do so by the government.

Though the Social Responsibility Theory is gaining in popularity and influence, it is not yet established. The American mass media today are free—free to serve the public or not as they choose.

Perhaps the strongest weapon in the arsenal of the social responsibility theorists is the Big Business emphasis in the modern American media. The United States is one of the few countries in the world whose major media are all privately owned. Like General Motors and U.S. Steel, American newspapers, magazines, and broadcast stations spend much of their time worrying about stockholders, dividends, and profits. They may have too little time left for worrying about service to the public.

Like every business, the mass media have a product to sell. In the case of the book and film industries, the product is the medium itself; part of the price of a book or movie ticket is the manufacturer's profit. For the

rest of the mass media, the product is you. Newspapers, magazines, and broadcast stations earn their considerable profits by selling your presence and your attention to advertisers. Articles and programs are just a device to keep you corralled, a come-on for the all-important ads.

The inexorable trend in American business is toward monopoly—toward bigness and fewness. The mass media are no exception. Chains dominate the newspaper and magazine industries. The three networks have an iron grip on television programming. The book business is controlled by a few giant companies on the East Coast, the movie business by a few giant companies on the West Coast. Competing with the biggies in any of these fields is incredibly costly and hazardous.

Several conclusions follow from these facts. First, since the American media are businesses first and foremost, they are likely to choose profit over public service when the two come into conflict. Second, since the media are owned by big businessmen, they are likely to reflect a businessman's notion of what's good for the public—which may not be everybody's notion. Third, since the media are close to monopolies, they are likely to offer the audience only a single viewpoint on public affairs, instead of the rich conflict of viewpoints envisioned by the Founding Fathers. And fourth, since the media make competition extremely difficult, they are likely to "black out" positions and groups of which they disapprove.

Pervasive influence, freedom of the press, and the profit motive—this is the combination that makes the American mass media unique. Nowhere else is such a powerful social force so little controlled by government, so much controlled by self-interest.