

## MASS *versus* MEDIA —WHO CONTROLS?

LEE LOEVINGER

**I**N RECENT YEARS there has been a spate of discussion about the effects of mass media and advertising on the public and society in general. Whether we have become more socially introspective and self-analytical or merely more articulate is not clear. It is obvious, however, that society is suffering the pangs of a developing and uncertain conscience and is going through a virtual orgy of self-analysis.

No general viewpoint has yet emerged or seems likely to win consensus. The enlarging debate suggests that society has shifted the focus of its attention from external to internal conditions. Throughout most of human history men cast their eyes upward toward Divine Providence to seek the causes of their misfortune or the means of achieving happiness. From the beginning of the nineteenth century till the middle of the twentieth century, the view prevailed that man's lot was largely fixed by the circumstances of his physical environment, and the focus of attention and struggle was the effort to control nature. Today the predominant mood of many intellectuals, speakers, and writers is that human institutions and habits of behavior are the basic forces controlling man's fate.

Chief among these forces, at least in current discussion, are the media and their content, including advertising. Although the discussion of media influence is prolific there is no agreement on any point. There are as many viewpoints as there are commentators, and even more if we take seriously all the tortuous argument of the most fervent evangelists of

---

Delivered at the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, February 11, 1969.

hope and despair. Some analysts differentiate the effects of one medium from those of another and some differentiate the effects of mass media from those of advertising. However, the relationship between the media and advertising and the relative effects of various media and their content remain to be established and are neither known yet nor even thoroughly analyzed.

Somewhat more is known about advertising and its influence than about the generalized social impact of the media both because this is a much more specific, and therefore manageable, topic of inquiry and also because it is a subject that is capable of quantitative analysis and investigation. Nevertheless, even as to advertising there is surprisingly little that is known with any degree of assurance although a great many observations and conclusions have been asserted with varying degrees of support.

ONE OF THE MOST INTERESTING and provocative of the commentators in this field has been that witty and colorful philosopher of the mass media, Marshal McLuhan. In *Understanding Media*, published in 1964, McLuhan said:

. . . the press seems to be performing its function most when revealing the seamy side. Real news is bad news—bad news about somebody or bad news for somebody.

This book-oriented man has the illusion that the press would be better without ads and without the pressure from the advertiser. Reader surveys have astonished even the publishers with the revelation that the roving eyes of newspaper readers take equal satisfaction in ads and news copy. During the Second World War, the U.S.O. sent special issues of the principal American magazines to the Armed Forces, with the ads omitted. The men insisted on having the ads back again. Naturally. The ads are by far the best part of any magazine or newspaper. More pains and thought, more wit and art go into the making of an ad than go into any prose feature of press or magazine. Ads are *news*. What is wrong with them is that they are always good news. In order

to balance off the effect and to sell good news, it is necessary to have a lot of bad news. Moreover, the newspaper is a hot medium. It has to have bad news for the sake of intensity and reader participation. Real news is bad news, as already noted, and as any newspaper from the beginning of print can testify. Floods, fires, and other communal disasters by land and sea and air outrank any kind of private horror or villainy as news. Ads, in contrast, have to shrill their happy message loud and clear in order to match the penetrating power of bad news. . . .

[Ads] are magnificent accumulations of material about the shared experience and feelings of the entire community. Of course, if ads were to depart from the center of this shared experience, they would collapse at once, by losing all hold on our feelings. . . . Instead of presenting a private argument or vista, [advertising] offers a way of life that is for everybody or nobody. . . . Ads have proved to be a self-liquidating form of community entertainment. . . . The historians and archaeologists will one day discover that the ads of our times are the richest and most faithful reflections that any society ever made of its entire range of activities.

**A** COMPLETELY DIFFERENT VIEW was articulated by Donald F. Turner, while Chief of the Antitrust Division of the Department of Justice. Mr. Turner is considerably more conventional and utilitarian in his approach. In 1966, Mr. Turner said:

Advertising provides economic benefits to society . . . chiefly in providing highly useful information. There is no doubt that advertising efforts comprise an important form of rivalry among firms. . . . However, . . . this form of rivalry is likely to be considerably different in economic effect than those forms of economic competition which are concerned with the prices established in the market. . . . Heavy advertising outlays lead both to more concentrated market structures and to the establishment of high monopolistic prices. . . .

To support these conclusions, Mr. Turner referred to the

packaged soap and packaged detergent industries. In the packaged soap industry the largest four firms selling to consumers have 74 percent of the business, while in the bulk soap business, the largest four firms have only 30 percent of the business. Similarly, in packaged detergents the largest four firms selling to consumers have 90 percent of the business, while the largest four firms selling bulk detergents account for only 47 percent of total industry output. Mr. Turner argued that advertising is important in influencing sales to consumers but that the bulk purchasers are industrial enterprises which are not significantly influenced by advertising. Thus he concluded that these fields show that advertising tends to produce market concentration.

Turner concludes that the most promising approach to the problem of advertising is to introduce new sources of consumer information. He says,

It is the extent of uncertainty about the relative merits of competing products which contributes to the large effect of advertising, and this suggests that government policies be directed toward neutral vehicles of information which tend to deal directly with the uncertainty. Advertising often plays a role analogous to that played by market concentration. . . . Current policies which tend to emphasize the role played by concentration may well need to be supplemented by those concerned directly with the adverse influences of advertising and other promotional efforts on competition.

**S**IMILAR CONCLUSIONS about advertising are reached by Professor J. K. Galbraith, who proceeds from altogether different premises with respect to competition and market structure. Galbraith advanced his analysis in a series of lectures delivered in 1966 and published in 1967. Basically Galbraith argues that American society is dominated by big business; that big business is run by a bureaucracy of technicians, which he calls the "technostructure"; and that the business bureaucracy is more interested in corporate, or institutional, survival and growth than in profit maximization.

For these purposes, corporations require planning; and planning is achieved by using advertising to manage, or control, consumer wants. Galbraith believes that the growing size of big business is inevitable, and he does not concede that anti-trust enforcement is either possible or desirable as a means of limiting economic power. He suggests that the existence of big business will require increasing government regulation, and probably government control of prices and wages, in order to insure the achievement of socially desirable goals.

With respect to advertising and its related activities, Galbraith has this to say:

The control or management of demand is, in fact, a vast and rapidly growing industry in itself. It embraces a huge network of communications, a great array of merchandising and selling organizations, nearly the entire advertising industry, numerous ancillary research, training and other related services and much more. In everyday parlance this great machine, and the demanding and varied talents that it employs, are said to be engaged in selling goods. In less ambiguous language it means that it is engaged in the management of those who buy goods.

Radio and television, says Galbraith, in their capacity to hold effortless interest, their accessibility over the entire cultural spectrum, and their independence of any educational qualification, are admirably suited to mass persuasion. "Radio and more especially television have, in consequence, become the prime instruments for the management of consumer demands. . . . The industrial system is profoundly dependent on commercial television and could not exist in its present form without it."

Galbraith suggests that the management of consumer demand by advertising, which he says is vital for planning in the industrial system, is similar to the regimentation of the public by authoritarian governments. He says that in Soviet-type economies resentment is expressed against the state and the heavy and visible apparatus by which it exercises control over the individual. Under non-Soviet planning it is ex-

pressed against the techniques and instruments—advertising and the mass communications which carry it—by which the individual is managed. Curiously, in neither society does the attack center on the planning which is the deeper cause.

Galbraith does not concede that advertising serves an information function, contending instead that anyone who can score positively on an intelligence test recognizes that the selling of goods requires well-considered mendacity, or, in plain language, lying.

**T**Hese attacks on mass media advertising have not gone without response. The Association of National Advertisers made a grant to Dr. Jules Backman, a professor of economics at New York University, under which he made a broad sampling of the economy. His compilation and analysis of statistical data are clearly far more extensive than anything offered by Turner or Galbraith. Not unexpectedly, Dr. Backman found that the data did not sustain the economic attacks on advertising. He concludes that:

The alleged flow of control from "the power of the purse" to "excessive profits," . . . is not supported by the available evidence. The barrier to entry created by large financial requirements is weak. The relationship between advertising intensity and high economic concentration is nonexistent. There appears to be no link between advertising intensity and price increase. Intensive advertisers appear to have only moderately higher profit rates than other companies. The record shows clearly that advertising is highly competitive, not anti-competitive.

Backman concedes that some economic waste may be involved when advertising is accomplished by a "shuffling around" of volume—that is, a shifting from one producer to another. However, this is inherent in the competitive system.

He finds specific benefits of advertising which must be weighed against any economic waste or disadvantages: First, advertising contributes to economic growth by encouraging

development of new and improved products. Second, advertising helps create mass markets which contribute to the economies of mass production. Third, expenditures for advertising are not a net cost to the economy. Part of the funds finance a wide selection of magazines and newspapers, as well as radio and television. Despite criticism of the power of advertisers, we have a more independent press when it is financed through advertising than when it is subsidized or controlled by government, as experience in many other countries shows. Fourth, advertising makes new and more economical methods of distribution possible. Fifth, advertising permits product differentiation by brands, which is wasteful when differences are trivial, but beneficial when differences result in improvement. Sixth, advertising provides a major source of information about products, thus saving customers time and effort.

Dr. Backman agrees that not all advertising leads to these benefits and says there is wide agreement that misleading advertising must be prohibited. Nevertheless, on balance, he concludes that advertising makes a major contribution to our national well-being and to the competitive nature of our economy.

Although research and economic data offered in support of Dr. Backman's study and conclusions are vastly greater than anything offered to support the views of either Professor Galbraith or Mr. Turner, it does not follow that all Dr. Backman's conclusions are fully proved, and it is notable that he addresses himself only to the purely economic aspects of advertising. It is implicit in the conclusions of Turner, Galbraith, and Backman that advertising in mass media influences consumer buying of some products, but relative impact in differing product markets and different social situations is not extensively or systematically explored.

**T**HE COMPLEX RELATIONSHIP between semantic, psychological, and economic aspects of advertising and mass communications is illustrated by another scholarly and scientific study recently published by a behavioral scientist from

the University of Missouri, Professor William Stephenson. He says that advertising is not, as widely believed, based on the principle of social control of the individual, but is based on what he calls the principle of convergent selectivity, or individual choice in behavior.

Stephenson says that mass marketing of mass-produced goods in a free economy has tended to hide the fact that the products become idiosyncratic by the time they reach a buyer. It is difficult to find two cars exactly alike because differences of color, interiors, accessories, engines, and so on make it possible for everyone to have a car for himself, different in some way from almost any other.

The diversity and selectivity of this has long been overlooked, and advertising has been criticized for conditions that relate to publics and propaganda, and not at all to the possibility of individual choice which is offered by advertising. Stephenson quotes Jean-Luc Goddard, a French film director, as saying that he can learn more about France from the advertisements in the magazines and newspaper than he can from the news they contain.

Professor Stephenson states the thesis of his book as being that, at its best, mass communication allows people to become absorbed in subjective play, or communication pleasure. He notes that there are those who look with an uneasy eye at such mass pleasures. They see mankind being painlessly put to sleep by advertising and mass pap. This is a jaundiced view. Mass communications is allowing people to enjoy themselves in a distinctive way the significance of which has been overlooked previously, and thus is enlarging the area of individual autonomy in a world of increasing social controls.

Being an integral part of mass communications, including broadcasting, advertising has not escaped the attention of the FCC. A few of the pronouncements emanating from the FCC may be worthy of mention. In 1967 a slight stir was caused by my favorite Commissioner with some unorthodox views on commercials. In April 1967, Commissioner Loevinger said:



The Loevinger hypothesis is that a very large group of Americans have received a good deal of education by watching commercials. It is dubious that commercials have conveyed the message which their sponsors and writers have sought so laboriously to transmit. Nevertheless, everyone knows that commercials are, in one sense at least, for real, whereas programs are mostly for fun. When a huckster extols the virtues of a new car, or when a nubile damsel shakes her shampooed hair, the looker and listener is not necessarily impressed with the sponsor's product, but may well learn the kind of clothes that are modish for young men and young women.

I suggest the possibility that television commercials may have had as much to do with the civil-rights revolution the United States has experienced in the last decade as court decisions. Literally millions of people have seen the accoutrements of prosperous middle-class living in circumstances in which these things were shown to them in the contrasting poverty of their own surroundings, and yet held out as things that they should desire, that were available, and that everyone might reasonably expect to get.

The one inescapable message of all commercials is: Here is a world that is attractive and that you should live in. The improbable heroes and heroines of programs can be dismissed as fictional and their environments can be regarded as fragments of a dream world. But not so the commercials. Insistently they say, this is real, this is available, this is for sale, and you should have it. That may not be very significant to the comfortably prosperous, who include all who form leagues for the limitation of commercials. But I suspect that is the most important and influential message television has carried to a large segment of its audience during the last ten years.

This hypothesis is consistent with the behavior and demands of very large groups living in the slum areas of the country. Whether these groups have been more influenced by learned discussions in Supreme Court opinions or by expectations aroused by television commercials is a question that must await further research

data before an answer can be ventured. Numerous questions challenge anyone seriously interested in this field, and few conclusions are supported by scientific data.

This speech was given in April 1967, long before the urban riots of 1967 and 1968. These have corroborated the views suggested. The best reports concerning these riots indicate that they were predominantly looting riots expressing the resentment of the slum-dwelling poor at their economically disadvantaged situation.

More recently another FCC Commissioner has discussed a similar subject but from a radically different viewpoint. Speaking before a group of broadcasters but obviously addressing the entire broadcasting industry he said:

Whatever America becomes next year, it will be in largest measure a nation of your own making. For it is you who tell me and 200 million other Americans what to think, what to buy, what is stylish, what my problems are, who to vote for—and who I am. One quarter of the average American's waking day—over half of his nonworking time—is spent listening to your message. It is you who fill the minds and hearts of America.

Although stated with unusual dramatic force, this is not a unique attitude. Many of the numerous critics of television either explicitly or implicitly suggest that it is responsible for most of our current social ills.

**T**HE VIEW that the broadcasting media are the real rulers of society in this country at this time is merely one variant of the devil theory of history and social evolution. Among the numerous clamorous voices warning us of some kind of imminently impending perdition or doom we have been told that society is in the firm control of one or another of at least a baker's dozen of different forces. These include the media; television networks; the military-industrial complex; the eastern establishment; the southern establishment; the liberal establishment; the scientific establishment; the rich

and super-rich; the technostructure or business bureaucracy; giant corporations; the financial interests of Wall Street; big labor; big government; the Pentagon; technology; the mindless mob.

Never in history has one country had so many different absolute despots completely in control of its destiny at the same time as we now have—if all current social analysts are to be believed. To say the least, we have a plethora of autocrats. It should be evident that those who make these claims cannot all be right, although some of them may be partially right, and all of them may be wholly wrong.

The conclusion that the mass media have substantial influence and probably predominant control over the thoughts and actions of the public is sometimes buttressed by the assertion that the media are supported by advertising and that advertising is based on the assumption that communications can influence the behavior of people. It is said to be self-evident that if the media are effective in influencing behavior through advertising they must also be effective in influencing behavior through their other content.

But it is neither logically nor empirically sound to argue or assume that the ability to sell soap implies the ability to sell social ideas or to disseminate education or culture. On the contrary, if one is to make any assumption it seems logical to assume that there are substantial differences in the influences that mold people's conduct in such varied fields as buying tooth paste, buying a house, and voting for a governor.

Were the matter of disseminating education no different from selling flour or soap we could abandon our schools and dispense education through the grocery stores. The most that can reasonably be asserted on this point is that advertising is a significant part of the mass media content and that its effects are therefore likely to be related to the influence of the mass media.

Unfortunately this conclusion does not advance us far in determining the power or influence of the media and advertising. That the media do mediate, and thus influence our

impressions, attitudes, and actions, is not exactly a new discovery. In a famous passage in Book Seven of *The Republic*, Plato relates a metaphor to show that men see only shadows, or images, of the real world and do not apprehend reality directly. Countless philosophers have discussed one or another aspect of this matter, and the field has been named "epistemology."

Recognition of the fact that media influence our ideas and actions is quite different from asserting that they control our ideas and actions. Most thoughtful observers have conceded the first conclusion and rejected the second. Forty-five years ago Walter Lippmann wrote:

The press . . . can fight for the extension of reportable truth. But as social truth is organized today, the press is not constituted to furnish from one edition to the next the amount of knowledge which the democratic theory of public opinion demands. This is . . . [due] . . . to the fact that the press deals with a society in which the governing forces are so imperfectly recorded. The theory that the press can itself record those forces is false. It can normally record only what has been recorded for it by the working of institutions. Everything else is argument and opinion, and fluctuates with the vicissitudes, the self-consciousness, and the courage of the human mind. . . .

[The press] is very much more frail than the democratic theory has as yet admitted. It is too frail to carry the whole burden of popular sovereignty, to supply spontaneously the truth which democrats hope was inborn. And when we expect it to supply such a body of truth we employ a misleading standard of judgment. We misunderstand the limited nature of news, the illimitable complexity of society; we overestimate our own endurance, public spirit, and all-round competence. We suppose an appetite for uninteresting truths which is not discovered by any honest analysis of our own tastes.

If the newspapers, then, are to be charged with the duty of translating the whole public life of mankind, so that every adult can arrive at an opinion on every moot topic, they fail, they are bound to fail, in any future one

can conceive they will continue to fail. It is not possible to assume that a world carried on by division of labor and distribution of authority, can be governed by universal opinions in the whole population. Unconsciously the theory sets up the single reader as theoretically omniscient, and puts upon the press the burden of accomplishing whatever representative government, industrial organization, and diplomacy have failed to accomplish. . . .

The press has often mistakenly pretended that it could do just that. It has at great moral cost to itself, encouraged a democracy still bound to its original premises, to expect newspapers to supply spontaneously for every organ of government, for every social problem, the machinery of information which these do not normally supply themselves. Institutions, having failed to furnish themselves with instruments of knowledge, have become a bundle of "problems," which the population as a whole, reading the press as a whole, is supposed to solve. . . .

The press is no substitute for institutions. It is like the beam of a searchlight that moves restlessly about, bringing one episode and then another out of darkness into vision. Men cannot do the work of the world by this light alone. They cannot govern society by episodes, incidents, and eruptions. It is only when they work by a steady light of their own, that the press, when it is turned upon them, reveals a situation intelligible enough for a popular decision. The trouble lies deeper than the press, and so does the remedy.

Lippmann's comments are as relevant and valid today as they were in 1922. Society is as complex now as it was then, the issues are as subtle, and the truth is as elusive as ever before. Further, these comments are as applicable to the broadcasting as to the print media.

**R**ECENTLY I propounded a theory of broadcasting and mass communications which implies essentially similar conclusions to those of Lippman. The theory is called the

"reflective-projective theory." Very roughly stated, the reflective-projective theory asserts that all media messages reflect aspects of the environment in which they originate but convey varying content to separate recipients as each recipient projects different meanings into his perceptions. Broadcasting is seen as an electronic mirror which reflects an image of society, and which acts as a telescopic mirror, reflecting an image of what is distant and concentrating and focusing on points in a vast universe. The mirror can pick out aspects of society, but cannot create an image that does not reflect something already existing in society. There is always a significant amount of ambiguity in the image projected, and the ambiguous mirror of broadcasting reflects a variety of images as it is turned toward one or another sector of society.

The reflective-projective theory warns against expecting too much of broadcasting. It says that broadcasting is not a means of doing quickly and easily what home, school, church, and state have been trying to do slowly and painfully for years. It warns that the mass media perform a reflective-projective function and are most unlikely to become instruments of social reform or great public enlightenment. The similarity of this view to what Lippmann said of the press is self-evident. Thus, like Walter Lippmann and the social scientists who have studied the subject, I reject the notion that the mass media do or can control men's minds and conduct, either for some particular purpose or in the interest of general social reform. The notion of media control of the masses is quite untenable for at least three reasons.

First, it is plainly contrary to the evidence of everyday observation, as well as of historical study. To begin with one of the most obvious items, there is little evidence that the media have very much influenced, much less controlled, our national elections. Both publishers and broadcasters were overwhelmingly opposed to the election of President Roosevelt, but the people were just as overwhelmingly in favor. More recently, the strong movement for full civil rights for Negroes originated and flourished in areas where the media either ignored or opposed it until it was too widespread and

potent to ignore. Black power extremism and separatism, urban riots, the social dropouts of the hippie movement, the wide use of psychedelic drugs, are all examples of current social movements that have been opposed rather than encouraged by the media. Many, if not most, of the bitter divisions on social and political issues that now exist in our society are the product of social forces the media have tried to suppress or discourage. Although we cannot specify with precision the part that mass media play in forming public opinion, it seems plain beyond rational controversy that they do not control it—that they do not effectively tell us what to think and who to vote for.

**I**N THE SECOND PLACE, the mass media are not qualified, and do not and should not seek, to control men's minds and conduct. The ownership of a printing press or the possession of a broadcasting license may provide the opportunity for establishing a news-gathering organization, but it does not bestow either wisdom beyond that of other men or some superior right to impose one's ideas on society. Assuredly the publisher and broadcaster have the same right as everyone else, and a considerably better opportunity than most, to express their own ideas. But their right and their opportunity are to inform and try to persuade, not to dictate or control. I doubt that any publisher or broadcaster would want it otherwise. I do not know any publishers or broadcasters who claim that they have the wisdom or ability to solve all our important social problems.

In our society those who wish the responsibility of seeking solutions run for public office; and, if they are elected, they have a mandate for their terms to seek solutions to the problems that come within the jurisdiction of their offices. All of us as citizens participate, according to our ability and inclination, in the dialogue and debates concerning common problems. The elected representatives of the citizens have the duty and responsibility to make the decisions as to action. The function of the mass media is to report the dialogue, debates, and decisions, not to control them. Those who con-

trol the media do well to reject the honor, the responsibility, and even the claim to being the creators of a new society or the directors of the destiny of our present society.

In the third place, I reject the assertion that the media really tell me and 200 million other Americans what to think, what to buy, what is stylish, what my problems are, who to vote for, and who I am; for this would be a complete negation of any idea of personal choice, liberty, or responsibility. Such a position seems to imply a disavowal of personal responsibility and a projection of a strong sense of personal impotence. While such things are matters of feeling and faith, rather than objective demonstration, I believe that the individual today has a greater opportunity than in any earlier era to become informed, to reach his own decisions, to make his own choices, and to act within a wider area of liberty.

Throughout the world today people are asserting the demand for individual liberty as never before in history. People are not seeking their freedom from political masters in order to surrender it to the masters of the media. As I would not seek or wield the power to control the public if I controlled the media, so as a member of the public I do not concede either the right or the power of the media to control the public, or to control me.

**M**ANY VOICES are heard today blaming the media for neither knowing the extent of their power nor seeking to use what influence they have for social improvement and reform. Attention is particularly focused on the issue of crime and violence and the role of television as a cause of violent and antisocial behavior. Perhaps the media managers may be blamed for not spending more effort, time, and money in trying to determine the influence of the media. However, they cannot sensibly be faulted for not knowing what this influence is.

Although philosophers have been speculating and scientists have been investigating human behavior for decades, and despite the great interest of numerous institutions, including governments, in ascertaining the influences that



control human behavior, relatively little is yet known. The only really general rule of human behavior that has been fully validated scientifically is that under strictly controlled conditions the conduct of normal people is completely unpredictable. The corollary in child psychology is that a well-trained child given clear and simple orders by his parents will do whatever he damn pleases.

In the field of television there has been at least one very elaborate and expensive experiment conducted during the last year. The Ford Foundation has given something over \$10 million to the Public Broadcasting Laboratory to prepare and present a series of television programs. A large number of highly talented, well-motivated, and idealistic people have been engaged in an effort to employ this money to produce the best television programming possible.

The net result of this experiment has been to establish that money, talent, good intentions, freedom from commercial interests, and high ideals are not sufficient to insure any very substantial cultural or social contribution in this field. Without passing any judgment on the merits of PBL programming, it is apparent that despite a large subsidy and expenditure of immense effort and talent PBL has produced no discernible effect on society or the public, has secured attention without much praise from the critics, and has wielded virtually no influence. This experiment has given strong demonstrative support to the proposition that in television, as in other fields, great achievements are easier to talk about than to accomplish.

In this respect television and the other media are not unique. There are a good many other less difficult fields in which we have made no greater progress. For example, we still know virtually nothing of the cause and the cure of the common cold. The common cold afflicts as many people as television and makes a good many people at least as uncomfortable, and some even more so. The common cold is a relatively simple physical phenomenon of far less complexity than crime or violence. It seems reasonable to suppose that the common cold may have one or a few relatively simple

physical causes whereas such social events as crime and violence almost certainly have multiple and complex causes.

Since our best efforts have not yet determined the cause or cure of the common cold, not to mention more important and difficult maladies such as cancer, it is not really surprising that we do not know the causes of crime or violence and have not been able to isolate and determine quantitatively the relative influence of a single social element, such as television, in the entire complex social environment.

**T**HE ATTEMPT to focus attention on television, or other media, as a major cause of crime and violence seems to be, in the current vernacular, a copout—an evasion of responsibility and avoidance of more important causes. There were murders, kidnappings, civil disorders, and riots in this country long before television. Indeed the worst manifestations of mob lawlessness and violence in this country were lynchings, which occurred almost entirely in the era before television.

Probably the only means of determining empirically what effect television actually has on crime and violence would be to shut it down, temporarily or permanently. It is interesting to contemplate what might happen in such circumstances. Of course, no one can say for sure what the result would be; but it seems beyond belief that shutting down television would reduce crime or violence in the streets. On the contrary, it seems more likely that the overall effect would be to increase street crime slightly as a large number of bored and maladjusted individuals took to the streets because there was nothing to interest them at home without the popular diversion of television.

Assuming that television may be a contributing cause to violence and civil disorder in some cases, it is clear that poverty, poor education, limited economic opportunities, inadequate homes, and many other social forces are also causes. These latter are probably more important causes of antisocial conduct than any or all of the media; and, in any event, it is our avowed social and ethical responsibility to

eliminate poverty and inequality of education and opportunity.

Strident denunciation of the media for failure to perform their questionable obligation to reform or improve society serves mostly to divert attention and effort from performance of the unquestionable social and ethical duty of citizens and their government to reform and improve basic living conditions for everyone. Denunciation of the media is simply a cheap and easy copout. By refusing to assume the role of social messiah, television does not assume the role of social devil.

It is not necessarily a matter for regret that the media neither know the extent of their power nor seek to use it for anything more elevated than purveying entertainment, news, and advertising to support their operations and make a profit. Those who would thrust great social responsibility and power on the media assume that the power will be exerted to achieve goals that such advocates espouse. But there is no such assurance.

If the media do find that they have, and decide to use, great power to influence social events they are as likely to pursue goals I disapprove as ones I favor. The media are even more likely to seek goals unacceptable to their most ardent critics. It is a strange quirk of irrationality that leads some to denounce the media as shortsighted, selfish, and generally benighted and concomitantly to condemn them for not using their position to exert greater social influence. The demand for media leadership expresses a profound yearning for elitism and distrust of democracy.

**A**LTHOUGH the evidence is, at best, scattered and fragmentary it seems that there is some indication of a self-protective principle at work in the field of social control. As the body automatically reacts to the invasion of harmful elements or organisms and tends to reject them, or to produce counteracting substances to achieve immunity, the psyche may similarly seek to differentiate among the many stimuli and influences which assail it and to challenge or reject those

which seem really threatening or harmful. The influence and effects of media presentations undoubtedly vary with many factors, but one of the most important factors is probably the nature of the subject matter. It appears to be a basic social law that mass media influence is inverse to the importance of the subject.

I would probably choose a toilet soap on the basis of an advertising suggestion; I would most certainly not choose my wife that way. People are much more likely to be influenced by advertising in their purchase of things like soap or beer than in the purchase of more expensive and permanent items like a house. The data show that advertising is most important in such fields as toilet preparations, soaps, detergents, drugs, and beer, and less important with respect to more expensive and durable commodities. Similarly I think that the recommendation of a newspaper or broadcaster may be more influential in the election of a county surveyor or city councilman than in the election of the President.

A second conclusion from available data is that the intended or ostensible effect of media communications is not necessarily the actual effect. In April 1967 I suggested that media messages, particularly commercials, say different things to different socioeconomic groups. The reflective-projective theory of mass communications says that all media contents convey a slightly different message to each member of the audience, as well as to different socioeconomic groups.

A recent experiment, reported in *Journalism Quarterly*, undertook to determine whether subjects understood what advertisements actually said or whether they assumed assertions which were not logically implied in the advertising message. Although the subjects were college students, they identified inaccurate and illogical restatements of advertisements as being accurate restatements two-thirds of the time. Thus it appears that the messages actually conveyed by advertising are influenced as much by the recipient's attitude as by the actual content of the advertisement. This is an aspect of communication that clearly calls for much more empirical investigation and thoughtful analysis.

A third conclusion is that media and advertising both reflect the environment in which they originate and have only slight and indirect power to influence that environment. Advertising does not create or change the nature of products, but only tells about products, more or less accurately. The evidence indicates that advertising does not create or significantly change the nature of demand. It may arouse latent wants which then become economic demands, and it probably directs attention to, and establishes preferences for, one rather than another commodity that satisfies demand.

Ultimately it is the ability of advertised commodities to satisfy public demands that determines their sale and economic success. On the other hand, advertising may be more important as a reflection of contemporary culture than much of the other media content. You could learn more about the way Americans live by walking through Macy's and Gimbels than by touring the Metropolitan Museum and the Museum of Modern Art. As McLuhan has pointed out, ads are a rich and faithful reflection of our national life and culture.

**S**IMILARLY the other varied content of the media reflect the environment—the social milieu and the expressed interests, tastes, and desires of the public. To an undetermined degree, and in an unknown and indirect manner, they also influence the environment, as a mirror both reflects the appearance of a person and also helps to change or mold that appearance.

Some of the misunderstanding on this subject seems to arise from a confusion of the mass media with the whole category of generic communications. Man is largely molded by stimuli and communications received from his external environment. But even today the mass media constitute only a part, and a minor part, of the total communications received from the environment.

The sources of communication for each individual are myriad. Each has its own appropriate category of messages and subject matter. To list them all for any individual is to write the story of his life. It is enough to say that the most

important ones for most people are still individual sources and individual communications, not mass media. Television has not yet become an acceptable substitute for a companion of the opposite sex—thank God.

The popular approaches to this subject are either to exaggerate grossly the influence and importance of media and advertising or to gain publicity by denouncing them and decrying their baneful influence. The effort to make as realistic and objective an appraisal of their power as observation and analysis permit does not lead to simple dramatic conclusions, such as the assertion that advertising leads to monopoly power, or is the basis for control of the economy, or that the people think only what the media tell them to think. Such conclusions appear to be unfounded and false, and the only conclusions I find warranted are rather qualified and tentative ones.

But we should all be happy that the media do not have the power which commentators like Galbraith and Turner and evangelists of the cult of salvation by communication would attribute to them. For one reason, such power would imply responsibility which does not belong to any private group, which the media are not qualified to assume, and which would be a most onerous burden. Such responsibility would inevitably entail regulation and government control, and one suspects that some of the motivation for the attribution of such great power to the media is the desire to impose regulation.

Most important, however, is the fact that as citizens and members of the public we can all join in proclaiming and rejoicing that the public is not subjugated to the media, and that the American citizen today has access to more information about the world, has available a greater range of choice and decision, and has a wider area of personal freedom than any other group of citizens in the world in all history.

This is a fact which does require to be proclaimed and emphasized. For responsibility is a product of freedom. You cannot tell a man that he is unfree and urge him to be re-

sponsible. Those who insist that we are pawns in the hands of the media deny not only our freedom but our responsibility. If we have no power, we are not responsible for what happens.

This is exactly the wrong doctrine for our time. We are—all of us—responsible for what is happening in our society, and what we need now is greater emphasis on our sense of personal responsibility and less talk about our hopeless helplessness. That, at least, is my faith; and if this faith is misplaced then democracy is an illusion and the American dream is a false hope.

### CARNE VALE

The artist, a student,  
worked part-time  
arranging letters on a  
local movie house marquee.  
He made his first sale  
to us, an abstract  
on cheap fiberboard;  
we paid for the gay  
oil colors,  
fat Tuesday swirls of  
blue, red, yellow.  
The artist, a student,  
called it war.

I see his name  
in this morning's paper,  
dead in Vietnam.  
I sit over coffee  
connecting  
death and the resurrection  
of high school Latin.

NANCY STETSON

*Sherman Oaks, California*