Access to the media: a problem in democracy

By HAZEL HENDERSON

The current public interest in all forms of mass communication reflects a growing understanding of its central role in our national life. Not only do we have schools of communications at many of our colleges, but we have an increasing body of scholarly analysis of the mass media's effects on our culture and our individual psyches. More people are at last realizing too, the awesome political power that comes with ownership or control over any medium of communication, whether television, radio, newspapers, magazines, wire services, computer networks, or any other system for moving information and ideas to significant numbers of people.

Communication between all citizens and all their institutions is indeed the primary integrative force needed to turn our fragmented, uncoordinated body-politic into a healthily functioning whole. The sum of all channels of communication in a society make up its vital nervous system. The great challenge is to ensure that all the components of this nervous system are free and open conduits for the maximum possible interchange of information between the maximum number of citizens.

The channels of communication in America today are technologically advanced beyond those available to any other body-politic. In fact, mass media are almost beginning to replace political parties in our system of government. They have informed and misinformed our citizens on national issues on an unprecedented scale, but in a largely unplanned manner. The mass media have shown the poor how the rich live, and have shown the rich what it is like to live in a rat-infested city slum. They have given us insight into pressing problems like "perspiration wetness," "tired blood," "bad breath," and the "blahs." They have made Americans interested in each other and whetted their appetite to communicate with each other. But the only way to do this efficiently is by using the mass media, especially the air waves—air waves that always seem to have an editor, a licensee, or a sponsor between ordinary citizens and that precious microphone, not to mention the "static" of endless commercials and entertainment programming.

Nonetheless, radio and television sets are the most efficient tools that Americans have at hand to help them understand our race relations, why our cities are decaying, what our politicians are saying, and what America's role in the world should be. For the under-skilled, broadcasting could offer nationwide job-training and basic education. For children, the air waves could provide an efficient, national "Headstart" program, without the costs of special transportation or facilities. Our mass media could become a national feedback mechanism by providing a random-access conduit for all the wisdom, creativity, and diversity of our citizens.

Our mass media are only a poor shadow of what they could be—not for lack of technology, but because of our imperfect understanding of their potential power. The mass media in America are still operated on the notion that they are purely businesses whose primary concern is to make profits for their stockholders, and to provide a medium for merchandising goods. In the last decade, we have begun to learn the considerable hidden cost to a society in making advertising the chief source of revenue to sustain the operations of its mass media. Since the original decision to cede the use of the air waves to private broadcasters, we have learned that if advertisers pay the cost of putting on programs, the public must pay the price of seeing only programs advertisers

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feel will sell their products. Instead of the justly dreaded government censorship, we ended up with censorship by sponsors and private owners.

The advertiser's desire for the largest possible audience naturally conflicts with the needs and interests of minority audiences. It also hampers the germination of new and controversial ideas, which must break into the mass marketplace if they are to gain consideration. In a sprawling country like America, coverage in the mass media is the only means of gaining a day in the court of public opinion. If minority groups cannot get coverage, their only non-violent recourse is to beg or buy advertising. But here they must compete with giant corporate product advertisers who can afford to pay $65,000 a minute for prime television network time. Competition for free "public service" advertising is heating up; but here again, it has been until recently the safe causes, like "Smokey Bear" or "Give A Damn," that are permitted to get their message through.

Even if civic groups begin to "sell" their ideas and programs in competition with products and politicians, who should decide how much time and space ought to be allotted to these different purposes? Just those who own or control the media? For broadcasters, this problem is already serious. Which groups deserve free "public service" time and which must pay? If a civic group, a politician, and a product advertiser all want to buy the same limited advertising time, how will broadcasters decide whose message gets on the air and whose is blacked out? For budding civic groups, the need for publicity is a matter of life and death, and a negative decision could condemn an organization to oblivion.

Similar problems have arisen in political primaries. Politicians would send advance men into an area and buy up all the available time. Other candidates would arrive and find themselves blacked out. And what if a local civic group had wanted air time to raise an issue that was being inadequately covered by the candidates? Some of these matters are subject to a loose set of rules (the "fairness doctrine") promulgated by the Federal Communications Commission, and now being challenged in court, but more often these decisions are left in the lap of businessmen.

When a society is in ferment, as ours is today, pressure for equal access to public opinion through mass media increases as the old consensus splinters. New ideas and new minority opinion groups spring up everywhere. These new ideas are vital for the continual process of renewal and adaptation that prevents cultures from decaying. At the same time, such new ideas are necessarily disruptive and controversial, and therefore underfinanced and without institutional vehicles to promote them. The realization is now dawning on groups espousing these new ideas, that in a mass, technologically complex society, freedom of speech is only a technicality if it cannot be hooked up to the amplification system that only the mass media can provide. When our founding fathers talked of freedom of speech, they did not mean freedom to talk to oneself. They meant freedom to talk to the whole community. A mimeograph machine can't get the message across anymore.

It is entirely possible that much of the recent radicalization of American politics may be due to this media bottleneck. Minority opinion groups have discovered that whereas media ignore a traditional press release on their activities, they send reporters rushing to cover a picket line or any attention-getting "happening." Once other groups caught on to this game, the media became desensitized to mere picketing, and escalation became necessary. Now to get the media's and, therefore, the public's attention, one must hold a dean hostage, dance naked through the streets, throw a rock, or start a riot. In psychological terms, the news media have been "rewarding" and therefore reinforcing destructive behavior, by drawing attention to it and making national figures out of those who have learned what kind of behavior keeps them in the camera's eye.

At the same time, quiet, constructive behavior on the part of all those thousands who continually work to build and heal society, is punished by the negative sanction of being ignored by the media, and never reaching society's attention. Of course, there are exceptions to this generalization, and there are many responsible publications, as well as some unusual radio and television stations that do not make a practice of exploiting sensational news. But until we recog-

nize the dangerous tendencies of the prevalent, oversimplified journalism based on the time-honored editorial use of "rape, riot, and ruin," the radicalization of politics will continue.

Until minority opinion groups are provided with a right of access to mass media, and thereby, society's group consciousness, they will continue to behave in any aberrant way necessary to get attention. Just as the labor movement had to stay in the streets until it had won the right to an orderly channel of communication (in this case, a bargaining table) for negotiation and redress of grievances, so will the new political movements disrupt until the system can provide them open and orderly channels of communication.

The battle now shaping up over the public's right of access to the mass media may well be the most important constitutional issue of this decade. The issue affects every segment of society —from blacks who wish to be portrayed adequately in the media to antiwar groups vainly trying to counteract the promotional budgets of military contractors; anti-pollution groups wishing to counteract the millions spent on defensive advertising, public relations, and lobbying by polluting corporations; or anti-cigarette groups trying to neutralize the millions spent by tobacco companies to promote the smoking habit. Until very recently, there have been only sporadic skirmishes fought for this right of access by a disorganized, apathetic public. The first real change came in 1953, with the birth of educational television. But even today, public television is still only funded at under 5 per cent of the level of commercial television, and our 150 public television stations must still largely rely on local charity to mount their programs.

Pressures to democratize media have mounted sharply now. As always, some critics are responsible and justified, and others demagogic. Many civic groups have learned that they can challenge broadcasters at license-renewal hearings, held every three years by the Federal Communications Commission. Another response has been the explosive growth of "underground" media. Protest magazines and newspapers are proliferating and "underground radio" is beginning to flourish on FM bands held by churches and universities.

An American Civil Liberties Union conference has announced its intention of working to broaden the interpretation of the First Amendment to include the concept of the public's "right of access" to the media. Professor Jerome A. Barron of George Washington Law School advanced this concept in his article entitled "Access to the Press —A New First Amendment Right," in the *Harvard Law Review* of June, 1967. He called for "an interpretation of the first amendment which focused on the idea that restraining the hand of government is quite useless in assuring free speech, if a restraint on access is effectively secured by *private* groups." Professor Barron thinks that the cure for suppression is government regulation through court rulings and laws to force the media to give time and space to unpopular ideas.

What can be done to democratize media and permit more citizen participation? Some enlightened broadcasters have been re-examining their policies. There have been more feedback and discussion programs on local stations, including several "ombudsman" programs to help citizens get action from unresponsive government or businesses.

But efforts simply to bypass the mass media continue. Several blocks in Harlem will soon be wired up to a community-antenna television system with a storefront studio, so that anyone who wishes to address the community can go down, wait his turn, and speak before the camera.

We must remind ourselves, meanwhile, that the present structure of our mass media was not ordained by the Almighty, but merely grew. The first amendment should not be a cloak for our current media operators to hide behind, or to wave in our faces if we suggest anything new. We must ask *whose* freedom of the press? Just the freedom of the present owners? And if so, what about the citizen's freedom of the press, and his freedom to hear the maximum diversity of opinion on all issues?

If we succeed in freeing our mass media from some of their past patterns of operation, then we can decide what needs to be communicated and how to use communications to build our future. First, we must have faith that new information, properly communicated, can change man's per-

ception of reality and therefore his attitudes and behavior. There must be a new, mature ethic of journalism, for both electronic and print media. Current mass journalism is still largely based on the old, fragmented Newtonian vision—where man was the dispassionate, objective observer of his world. Even though few people still believe that man can ever observe the world objectively but is an interacting part of it, there is still a widespread lag on the part of our mass media in perception of this integral nature of reality.

The new, post-Newtonian journalism will be less concerned with aberrant, violent happenings and manifestations. Rather, intelligent, creative newsmen and editors will face up to the knowledge that true objectivity is impossible, and therefore shoulder and acknowledge the heavy burden of responsibility thus placed upon them. They will analyze the complex structures and interrelationships which lie beneath the surface events in the same way that only a handful of "little" magazines do today, and present this material simply for mass audiences. In a democracy as complex as ours, only if the voter can obtain such simplified coverage of the parameters of major issues, can he hope to use his vote wisely. Mass media reporters will seek out injustices and pressures in society before they need erupt in violence or find expression in the "underground media." Just as the sensory system of primitive creatures can only signal danger or dysfunction, so our primitive mass journalism has concentrated on signalling only these inputs to our body-politic. Editors will seek news of the integrative activities of man, as well as his destructive acts. Like individuals, a society needs confidence in itself, and its ability to cope with its problems. We must know of man's love and courage, as well as his hate and fear.

To address adequately the need for more democratic access to public opinion, as well as to meet its huge responsibilities as our most powerful educational system, mass journalism, both electronic and print, must face up to a greatly enlarged function in a complex, mass society. If it fails, the consequences may be disastrous.