

## CHAPTER 11

# Media Me

**W**e are socialized throughout our lives by the mass media. This agency of indoctrination is even more powerful than the school system because it comes in the form of entertainment and hence doesn't arouse the inner opposition that school, thank heaven, always arouses in the hapless pupil. The folks who do media spend many dollars and hire many experts to find out exactly what forms of entertainment will grab you. Their object is to get your absolute attention when the ads come on. That is why there is so much violence in media. It is part of our animal heritage that we become wide awake when there is any physical danger around us. Research shows that when incidents of violence are pictured on the screen, a milder form of this instinctive reaction goes into effect: We pay attention.

### Getting Behind the Media Curtain

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Media culture is a culture that has been invented to sell soap. There is precious little wisdom in it. Yet, we are all deeply influenced by media versions of reality. Indeed, we depend on media and on schools for nearly all the knowledge we have of the world that lies beyond what we can immediately see and experience. Ask yourself, for a moment, how you “know” what China is like, how you “know” what sort of people politicians are, or how you “know” what your hometown was like a hundred years ago. If you are honest, you will see that, conceivably, you could have been lied to about all these things.<sup>1</sup>

Who controls what comes to you in TV, films, or newspapers? Almost without exception these forms of the mass media are owned by giant, multinational

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<sup>1</sup>If you would like to see whether your schooling thus far has misrepresented American history, read Howard Zinn's (1980) *A People's History of the United States* and James Loewen's (1996) *Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong*.

conglomerates that are interrelated in many different ways with the whole network of huge corporations that dominate the American economy. What do rich people want you to know about Cuba? South American revolutionaries have a nasty habit of nationalizing American corporate property in their countries. The United Fruit Company stands to lose every time a Castro appears on the scene. Will they tell you that under Castro, Cuba has developed the best medical care system in Latin America? What will they tell you about the nature and reality of war, when it may be necessary for you to be drafted to fight a war for rubber in Asia or for oil in Iraq or Venezuela? These are questions you must learn to ask yourself. In fact, you should become suspicious of all information you do not get firsthand. The source and the bias of the source must always be considered when getting information secondhand. You must also consider whether your source had access to good information. During Vietnam, for example, very few Americans in Vietnam spoke the language. This meant they could only speak with Western-educated Vietnamese in the cities. No wonder they didn't know what was going on in the much larger countryside.

On those rare occasions when the media cover something we know about firsthand, we are usually amazed to see how distorted the picture is. But we seldom generalize from these occasions because it is pretty difficult to admit that we don't know as much as we thought we did. It may help you to keep in mind that realizing how little one knows is the inevitable beginning of wisdom.

Media work on us in much more subtle ways than just misinforming us. Media inculcate general attitudes toward life, love, pleasure, and pain. What do the media want you to know about the real nature of love, if their object is to sell you hair-spray? What do they want you to know about contentment, if the object is to sell you linoleum? How do they want you to feel about yourself, if they are softening you up to rush out and buy the latest designer jeans? Advertisers are well aware that it isn't effective to break into an honest story about human life with an ad that tries to tell you that happiness lies in the right choice of shampoo, so the programming must be brought down to the simplest level that serves this manipulative advertising.

Media mediate between us and events beyond our immediate world and also between us and events in our immediate world by influencing us to define and see that world in a certain way. In the final analysis, media get right inside your personality and mediate between you and yourself. Take the critical voice, which says "too fat," for example. Isn't your ideal of the proper body form taken mainly from media? Look around next time you are at the swimming pool. See what the real range of human shapes looks like.

## Exercise: Developing Specific Insight

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Generalized suspicion of media information is not enough. Rather, we need to develop very specific insights. I would like to suggest to you an exercise to start you on your way in this direction.

Sample four hours of television programming, picking a variety of media forms: soap operas, evening weeklies, old movies, talk shows, and so on. Pick programs that present types of human beings. For this purpose, skip sports, news, and documentaries. Concentrate on media fiction or on programs that present those media creatures we call celebrities. Take detailed notes as you watch. List the major characters and describe them in some detail: How are the characters dressed? What sort of bodies and faces do they have? What sort of posture? What do they do for a living? Are they rich, poor, or middle class? What is their ethnicity? How do they talk to each other? How old are they?

After the first two hours of observation, take two hours for real-life observation. Pick two spots in quite different neighborhoods. Choose places where you can watch people easily. Self-service laundries are very good for this, as are public parks, bus terminals, airports, and so on. Pick several people to watch and make the same observations that you made about your media characters.

Now, go back for two more hours of media watching. You may add new categories for observation if they occur to you during your first set of observations. Follow this with two more hours of real-people watching. Then, just for your own information, look over your notes and start drawing some comparisons between media people and real people. Can you see the direction in which media is distorting? Can you assess the effect of these distortions on your own attitudes toward other people—toward yourself? If you do this exercise thoroughly, I believe it will forever change the way you perceive both media and real people. I won't tell you any results on this one. I will let you find out for yourself.

If you happen to have a class or independent study in which you could use these observations for a project, one good way to present your findings is by making a visual presentation for the class. If you don't have a camera, you might try comparing people in magazine advertisements to magazine pictures of real people. (You will find real people rather hard to find in most magazines. This itself is an eye opener.) In preparing visual programs, I found that it was nearly impossible to find pictures of real blue-collar workers in magazines. I also discovered that my pictures of real people were mainly in black and white, while the advertisement people were mainly in color. How subtly such a difference acts on our intelligence, making the advertisement pictures somehow more vivid and real than actual people.

If you have a camera and don't mind taking pictures of people or can do so inconspicuously, you can use presentation software to prepare slides of real people and compare them with slides made from magazine advertising. There are many possible variations on this theme. For example, you might compare just people over 65 years of age in media and reality, or you might use teenagers or non-whites. Take any aspect particularly interesting to you.

I hope that in this chapter I have given you the idea that knowledge can be acquired playfully. It is when we play that we are most imaginative and also the most open to new ideas. Perhaps you can design some exercises of your own to explore some dimension of experience that fascinates or frustrates you.

## MIND, SELF, AND MEDIA

The media have become so all pervasive in our society that it is no longer easy to determine whether the media are an extension of our culture or whether our culture has become merely an extension of the media. Although there is certainly enough in this issue alone to write a very lengthy (and probably very dry) book, I would just like you to consider for a moment that this is not an issue that should be of concern only to bespectacled professors and social philosophers. This is an issue that strikes at the very root of your experience of college and, indeed, may strike at the very root of what it means to live in this society.

To start with, I would like you to consider the idea that we are not born knowing what it means to be human. We are not born with an instinctual framework or the hard wiring that allows us to unerringly relate to others. We do not come into the world with some ingrained, prescribed set of roles and rules for interactions between ourselves and with ourselves. Unlike a bee or an ant, which seems to be born already capable of acting perfectly within the role given to it, we are born with a largely undetermined way of being. Instead, we are born into a culture, and this culture, in large part, determines what it means to be human and how we are to express this humanity in and through ourselves. Our culture, in large part, determines who we are; it determines our identity.

Considering the role that mass media play in our culture, and the role that culture plays in shaping our identity, it is imperative that we begin to look critically at our personal relationship to the media and, probably more important, how this relationship affects our experience of the world.

If we stop for a second to consider where we get most of our information about the world outside of our direct experience, it becomes obvious that most information is delivered and filtered through one of two sources, either the media or educational institutions. Fortunately, our educational institutions are structured in such a way that there is some involvement in the process; it is possible to engage in healthy questioning and dialogue concerning what we are being told. Information from the media, on the other hand, is presented in such a way that we are passive, usually sitting in our living rooms or dorms while the images and words are played in front of us. The result is that we are given a view of the world that is exactly what someone else wishes us to see. This should raise some concern when we think about what the possible motivations are for presenting exactly what we are shown. Rather than listing what some of these motives might be, I think it would be helpful to let you engage in this questioning exercise yourself.

It is not only through news programs that the media shape our perceptions of the world. On a much broader and more insidious level, media shape our experience of the world through television, radio programs, and advertisements. Media culture depends on selling products for its survival, and most of its vast machinery is geared with this end in mind.

There is something that is required for the realization of this end, however. It is impossible to sell an endless line of products to people who are basically content with who they are. The survival of media culture depends first on us seeing ourselves as always lacking in some fundamental aspect. This is why the images of people given to us through most television programs and magazines are nothing like representative samples of the public. Quite simply, the media culture could not survive if it allowed itself to show us images that are closely related to what we really are. Instead, we are given an image of humanity that is very narrow, to say the least. We tend to take these images as what we are supposed to be, internalizing those images as some sort of true picture of reality. But, of course, most of us are nothing like these images.

Media culture creates, for us, an identity based not on who we actually are but rather on what we are not. We are not inherently attractive, so we need makeup and hairspray to closer approximate the image of feminine beauty given in the latest prime-time sitcom. Our bodies are not shaped properly, so we need the latest fad food supplement. And then, when it seems that we are actually catching up and have the latest fashions and the fastest computers, corporations come out with a new line that makes what we currently have obsolete.

Think for a moment about why there are new high-fashion lines presented at least yearly or why car manufacturers come out with new product changes every few years. We are told that it is to bring the consumer the latest, greatest achievements of the industry. The real reason is very different. The simple fact is that our consumer-driven media culture cannot ever allow us to think that what we have is enough. Nothing ever will be enough, so long as we internalize that critical voice of the media, which says “not thin enough” when we look into the mirror. We are never whole and complete exactly as we are.

There is a very subtle philosophical principle that the media understand and use very well. The principle is that human beings tend to use the world as a mirror of themselves. We tend to define ourselves by our experience of the world. What is cruel in the media culture’s manipulation of this is that the media ensure that we are constantly inundated with images that are literally impossible to attain. The actual models in magazine advertisements can’t even match the images of themselves! After the model sits through hours of makeup and uncomfortable posing, the photographs are modified and enhanced by computer imaging.

This all leaves you in a position that would seem comical, if it weren’t so deadly serious in its effects. We look to the world to see what it means to be a human and are given images of humanity that are complete fabrications. We tend to take the images provided by the media as some sort of ideal humanity, a model of ourselves that is somehow a perfection to be attained. We are put in a position of seeing who we really are as someone who is lacking. What is tragic, and at the same time comic if you can free yourself from it, is that these images are not only not authentically ideal, they are not even human. We are left trying to attain some grotesque characterization of humanness while ignoring that to be human means to be exactly what we are, right now.

In short, media not only mediate between ourselves and the outside world, but they also make immediate experience of who we are very difficult. Look at your own criticisms of yourself and especially of your body. Whose voice is it that is really doing the criticizing? Look at your relationship to where you live and the material things that surround you. Do you spend much time really appreciating any of it, or are you always looking for something more, something better? Look at the career you might be currently considering. Are you considering it because you really think you will find some self-expression in it, or are you looking for the power to buy more material things? When those are gained, will they be enough, or is something different needed for true contentment?

I would like you to consider one last thing in this section: the idea that real contentment is not a matter of having or owning certain things but is rather about freedom. I would like you to consider the possibility that there is a sense of the word *freedom* that we have very little acquaintance with and that we should get much closer to. Freedom, in this sense, is not the outside freedom that we usually talk about when we use the word. It is not freedom of speech or expression or anything along those lines, no matter how noble these ideas of freedom are. It is certainly not the sense of freedom that media culture gives us, freedom to get more and more, to merely own whatever it is we want at this moment.

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This other type of freedom is much more radical. It is an inner freedom that isn't about how we act or what we do. This freedom is concerned with who we are. In this view, freedom isn't about being able to do, or own, what we want when we want. Instead, this freedom is about being something beyond what we have been told we are and what we tell ourselves we are. It is about being something beyond our culturally conditioned identity. It is a sort of radical self-determination, a freedom to not be limited by what you think you are or are not.

We are sort of conditioned to view freedom as the ability to do what we want, yet we rarely consider that what we want is often determined by others. In our media-driven culture, this is especially true. This sense of freedom is actually a very confined space. The radical sense of freedom, however, is very different. It is the freedom to allow ourselves not to want, to allow ourselves to simply be what we are, a freedom to be complete. Most of us don't see ourselves as simply what we are. Instead, we see ourselves as not yet thin enough, rich enough, kind enough, you-name-it enough. A large part of this is a direct result of growing up in the sea of media. Another part of this freedom is the freedom to let the world, and especially other people, be exactly what they are in our experience of them. All too often, we experience the world through the filter of the media. Instead of experiencing our apartment as what it is, we experience it as not big enough. Our families may not be loving enough; that stranger is not attractive enough or not as approachable as we want him or her to be. This freedom is also about giving freedom to others to be exactly what they are.

But this freedom is not something that can really be sensed by talking about it. It must be experienced, so there are listed here a couple of experiments to help give you a taste of that freedom. It is my hope that you will experience a little bit of breathing space through these exercises. I always find these little tastes of freedom to be satisfying in the same manner that a good afternoon nap is satisfying. You may find yourself returning to these exercises again and again.

First, look at yourself nude in the mirror, briefly, and write down the judgments that you make about the image in the mirror.

Now, as in the previous exercise, sample two hours of television programming, taking detailed notes on how characters are dressed, what sort of bodies they have, their posture, and the manner in which they relate to each other. Do this on a fresh sheet of paper. Are they rich, poor, or middle class? What do they do for a living? What is their ethnicity? How old are they? For this exercise, skip news programs, sports, and documentaries. Focus instead on fiction programs and especially on any programs that highlight media celebrities.

After doing this, take two hours and observe people in real life. Try doing an hour each at two spots in quite different neighborhoods, both in places where it is easy to observe a large number of people, such as self-service laundries, shopping malls, airports, and so on. Take the same type of notes that you did in the first part, but this time add another category. This time, *list also the judgments that you make about the people you see*. Do you see them as attractive, unattractive, fat, thin, rich, poor, and so on?

Then go back and do another hour of media watching and another hour of real-life observation and look back over your notes. Draw comparisons between the images portrayed in media and the people seen in real life. In what direction does the media distort images of people? Pay particular attention to the judgments you wrote down.

Now, compare those judgments to the judgments you wrote down about yourself. To make those judgments, what are you comparing yourself and others to? Do the judgments about yourself make sense when compared with observation of people in real life? Do those judgments arise from a comparison to the real world or to something else? Are the judgments even valid in comparison to the real world? Finally, is that critical, judging voice even you, or can you identify that voice with how the media would like you to see the world?

As a final step, go back to the mirror, nude, and listen carefully to that judging voice and, as far as possible, do not do anything about it. Don't try to squelch it or identify yourself with it or change it. Stand in front of the mirror for at least 15 minutes and simply observe your image and the judging voice. What happens to both?

—Rick Hartman