1980

Real: Mass-Mediated Culture

Michael Intintoli

Burlington County College

Recommended Citation
https://repository.upenn.edu/svc/vol6/iss1/14

This paper is posted at ScholarlyCommons. https://repository.upenn.edu/svc/vol6/iss1/14
For more information, please contact repository@pobox.upenn.edu.
Real: Mass-Mediated Culture
style is not viewed as an interaction between organizations and the people outside them. Objections aside, however, *Photographers at Work* makes photography a more comprehensible practice.

References

- Cantor, Muriel
- Fazey, Ian Hamilton
- Golding, Peter, and Philip Elliott
- Janowitz, Morris
- Schlesinger, Philip
- Tuchman, Gaye
- Williams, Raymond


Reviewed by Michael Intintoli
Burlington County College

Mass-Mediated Culture is a useful book, but perhaps not in the way the author intended. As an effort to synthesize a vast literature on a mass communication and culture, the book touches on a number of issues basic to the study of complex society and mass communication. In doing so, it demonstrates the importance of developing an anthropology of mass communication and media.

The book is an ambitious undertaking. In 280 pages Real proposes a theoretical framework for the study of mass-mediated culture, which he defines as "expressions of culture as they are received from contemporary media, whether they arise from elite, folk, popular or mass origins" (p. 14), summarizes much of the literature on mass culture, describes and justifies his methodology, presents several case studies, and expounds the reader to create a setting in which the "liberating potential" of media could be realized. The core of his argument is that mass-mediated culture is a crucial link between the material setting and institutional structure of a society and the character of consciousness and symbol system of that society. To support and illustrate his contention Real presents case studies of Disneyland, the Super Bowl, medical programs on television, a Billy Graham crusade, a presidential campaign, and an Aymara fiesta in the Andes. He justifies this choice of topics, arguing that they are "focused on a specific event or person as a dominant and widespread cultural expression that continues over a period of years, represents a major institutional area or subsystem of society and is significant as an expression of a total cultural system" (p. 37).

In a brief section of three pages, Real describes the "methodologies" of functionalism, structuralism, and aesthetics and says that all three are necessary for an adequate understanding of mass-mediated culture. He then, just as briefly, characterizes his approach—without, however, integrating in any systematic way the proposed theory, methodologies, and research techniques. He labels his approach ethnographic, exegetical, typological, cross-cultural, critical, and policy oriented.

*Ethnography...* identifies an experience in exact detail together with historical and other necessary factual background. *...Exegis...* identifies the precise meaning of the experience both intensively in itself and extensively in its association. When well executed, the two define what an individual case typifies about a culture. The *cross-cultural* comparisons are most evident in the Aymara study, which compares and contrasts characteristic structures of a non-mediated culture with the culture represented in the other case studies. *Critical procedures* seek precise understanding of subtle associations, implications and problem areas. They seek both positive appreciation and negative sensitizing to potential exploitation and unconscious excess. *...A final procedure in these studies points beyond understanding only and suggests appropriate and constructive responses. [p. 36]*

The six case studies follow. While Real uses a wide range of approaches, cites an extensive literature, and has chosen varied topics, the results are limited and repetitive. Each chapter hammers home the theme that mass-mediated culture "primarily serves the interests of the relatively small political-economic power elite that sits atop the social pyramid." Disneyland represents "utopian typifications" and instructs through "morality plays that structure personal values and ideology." The study of the Super Bowl approaches it as a mythic spectacle, emphasizing dominant American institutions and ideology. Televised medical programs are examined by use of the concepts "genre" and "formula." A major conclusion is that the programs support cultural notions of health, glorify and protect the interests of doctors, and fail to make available to the public useful information on health and illness. The following chapter on a presidential campaign concludes that the current political communication system represents an "authoritarian use of mass-mediated..."
culture to manipulate and mislead people." The study of Billy Graham again emphasizes how mass-mediated culture supports dominant institutions and ideology. The final chapter on the Aymara Indians is offered as a contrast to mass-mediated culture, within the conventions of contrasts between traditional and modernized societies, updated with references to communication and forms of consciousness. Real, not surprisingly, finds that his case studies support his "hypotheses" that mass-mediated culture "reflect[s] the political economy, channel[s] popular tastes, and cause[s] individual and social effects" (p. 248). Needless to say, such hypotheses are uninformative.

Finally, Real argues for the development of what he calls "cultural studies," following Carey (1975) and Williams (1974). Such studies would avoid the errors of positivism and scientism that have characterized the dominant trend in American research on mass communication. Culture is to be viewed as "expressive," and with this orientation Real contends that we can examine the ways in which expressive forms are related to historical and social conditions and the ways in which they create patterns of meaning and significance. Human behavior is to be read as a text in context:

The text of cultural studies is human action and symbols broadly conceived; the context is the set of historical and institutional arrangements that structure action and symbols in a particular way in a given society. [p. 240]

He concludes with suggestions for the development of a critical theory of mass communication which can lead to an emancipated use of media, as opposed to the current predominantly repressive use.

Real makes reference to a vast literature and specifically cites the work of several anthropologists. The citations generally occur, however, when Real is attempting to justify the notion that places, performances, and programs have mythic or ritualistic functions. He also makes use of what might be called aspects of an anthropological perspective in that he does attempt to be theoretical and systematic in his conception of the workings of a sociocultural system. His general failure to do so accounts for the superficiality and misleading character of his work.

It should not be necessary to describe and justify an anthropology of media or mass communication at this late date; indeed, one can hardly be said to exist. Anthropologists, with few exceptions, have fundamentally avoided joining virtually all the other disciplines relevant to the study of mass communication. There are a number of reasons for this which are worth mentioning since they have implications for the general orientation of anthropology in the future. The following observation was made over ten years ago:

Viewed in a broader context . . . mass communication is by no means an exclusive feature of modern life, but merely a new form and further development of social communication, present in every culture. But this phenomena, as such, has also been virtually ignored by traditional anthropology. It is either regarded as an intrinsic element of culture that need not be considered as a separate aspect, or else it is taken for granted as a 'universal' without significant intercultural variation. That latter standpoint is particularly dubious. [Peck 1967:68]

In large measure, the failure of anthropologists to grasp the significance of the study of mass communication is part of a larger failure to deal with communication as a social activity. Anthropologists have tended to focus on language, its structure, or its relationship to culture and thought (Hymes 1967), with the exception of early work by Mead and Bateson. Sociolinguistics and sociovistics (Challen 1974) can be understood as recent efforts to correct this failure.

Anthropologists have also tended to overlook change via the mass media, as well as change in general, as they described or, better, created the "anthropological present" and/or used functional approaches. From such a perspective mass media and communication would be disruptive or corrupting to the ideal or idealized traditional way of life (Peck 1967). Perhaps an analogous tendency in the study of complex societies has been to romanticize the marginal people we tend to study. There has been little systematic research on mass communication and the uses of communication media in traditional societies. Two exceptions are Keesing's study of a Samoan elite cited in Peck (1967) and Powdermaker's study of media use among Africans working on the Copperbelt of northern Rhodesia (1962).

With respect to the study of communicators in complex society, Powdermaker's (1950) study of Hollywood film production stands alone. It is interesting to note that the study was one of the first by any type of social scientist to consider carefully the role of the communicator in context. Also, there is Mead and Metraux's The Study of Culture at a Distance (1953), which is a compilation of content analyses undertaken to determine cultural and character patterns and their interrelationships. Recently there have been signs of a renewed interest in mass communication content, with several studies approaching mass communication content as myth (Denby 1971; Maranda 1972; Landers 1974), and a call for the study of mass communication and media use (Worth 1974; Eiselin and Topper 1978; Challen 1978), but little follow-up.

I suggest that anthropologists can contribute to the study of mass communication by using Mass-Mediated Culture as an example of the unsuccessful and incomplete use of an anthropological perspective. Such a perspective involves a set of interrelated conceptual and methodological assumptions and constructs which
provide an ideal set of tools for the study of mass and mediated communication. Fundamentally, the perspective involves (1) a generalized framework of biocultural or sociocultural systems and/or evolution; (2) the theoretical development of the concept of culture; and as a result of these primary orientations, (3) an emphasis on cross-cultural studies of (4) natural systems of behavior, which (5) rely on participant observation and (6) reflect the awareness of the characteristics of culture in a distinction between native and observer's viewpoints. An integral element is the use of ethnographic research to develop a cumulative and wide-ranging body of data for the development of hypotheses and their support or refutation. The perspective, in my view, allows anthropologists to study both objective and subjective dimensions of behavior and add to an increasingly powerful and precise set of statements relating meanings and their settings.

The relevance of such a perspective is apparent when Real proceeds with the study of mass-mediated culture without first distinguishing the problematic relationships between symbolic and social systems. The existence of mediated symbolic communication and variegated publics and producers renders any reductive orientation misleading. The degree of conceptual and methodological confusions is evident in Real's discussion of his study of the Billy Graham campaign. I choose this example, not simply because it involves a mistaken notion of ethnography, but as an illustration of why and how the anthropological compilation of ethnographies of communication is imperative. Real labels his approach "ethnographic," but he actually relied upon six one-hour Graham telecasts that were videotaped. His defense of his use of the videotapes as ethnographies exposes his oversimplification of the communication process. To the objection that videotaped telecast is not a "direct expression of human behavior but only a record of an edited and disseminated partial version of behavior" he answers that all behavior is "edited" and contact with mediated communication has an influence or impact "directly paralleling direct personal contact." He goes on to make the following case:

Moreover, the customs, rituals, and culture portrayed in the sounds and moving images coming from speakers and screens, because of the pre-editing to fit the tastes of and to link together millions, are themselves virtually ethnographic reflections of cultural regularities. A second objection is that the telecast itself is not completely self-explanatory and that only the study of the people making (sic) television or receiving it is genuine social science. It is true that intention and social context are important. Nevertheless, the focus of cultural investigation is obviously on that point of impact mediated message. ... Popular television may present a distorted picture of social behavior, but because the most commercially successful distortions are always toward the mass norm, television offers a view of social behavior that is more, not less, representative of the tendencies and regularities of a society. In that sense, ethnographic records of mass-mediated culture are at least as valid as ethnographic records of non-mediated individual [sic] and group culture. [p. 171]

I have difficulty in following Real's argument, but he seems to argue that the content of the videotape presentation is similar to the nonmediated behavior or events it is "about" — both are edited, both have an impact, both are characterized by regularities. Therefore we can use the videotaped presentation as we would the observations made of the nonmediated behavior, the assumption being that the differences between the two are insignificant! As part of the same argument Real goes on to say that television may present a distorted picture of social behavior, but that the distortions are "toward the mass norm," thus representative of the "tendencies and regularities of a society." What he means by a "distorted picture" and "toward the mass norm" are unclear to me. When he contends that what is presented on television is both distorted and representative of the behavior the programs are about, it is difficult to resolve the contradiction. Again, we are asked to take the videotaped performance as a "reflection" of the behavior the presentation is about, but with the proviso that the picture is distorted. How it is distorted and what it is a distortion of is never made clear.

Real then goes on to dismiss the study of context and intention by stating that our focus of study should be on the "point of impact media message." What he means by the phrase is again unclear to me, but he implies the impact of the communication is in the text itself as if the message can be determined independent of the symbolic interactional process. To do so is to deny the active role of the viewer or user of a presentation and the importance of the strategy of interpretation that is used (Worth and Gross 1974) and to oversimplify the processes involved. Also, Real appears to have ignored his own argument by stating that context is unimportant for studying the meanings of messages, when in his concluding chapter he makes a case for studying texts in the context of a set of "historical and institutional arrangements."

To identify the content of a program with the nonmediated behavior it is about is to confuse the picture with the thing, assume what has to be demonstrated, and deny the active, complex processes involved in symbolic communication. Real deserves credit for attempting to sketch out an overall framework for the study of mass-mediated culture. In part, the success of such an undertaking depends upon the ways sociocultural systems are imaged. While Real notes the importance of the historical and institutional setting, at most he introduces fashionable assertions about mass-mediated culture and the conditions of its creation. For
example, he states he has supported the hypothesis that mass-mediated culture "reflects the political economy," but he presents little evidence for his assertion. An example of a recent book which does provide empirical support for the "reflection hypothesis" is Gaye Tuchman's *The TV Establishment: Programming for Power and Profit* (1973). She draws together a number of studies which examine the ways in which mass-mediated fare is produced so that the reader can see the ways in which programs are manufactured to fit the requirements of the larger society, particularly the requirements of political and economic interests.

While a framework which does justice to the character of various historical and institutional settings must be created, we also need ethnographies of communication which get at the ways people actually make and use mass-mediated culture. Two studies that demonstrate the worth of such a strategy are Tuchman's *News, the Newsman's Reality* (1969) and Gans' chapter on how Italians and Americans use mass communication in *The Urban Villagers* (1962). We need systematic studies of the relationships between mass-mediated culture and elite, folk, popular, and mass culture and the ways in which each is produced or used by variegated producers and publics.

Real's attempt to synthesize a number of theoretical and methodological orientations will invite criticism on a number of counts. For those who like their discipline boundaries maintained and their theory "pure," the book is bound to be irritating; Real's theorizing and case studies will seem simplistic. For those who see the aim of such a book as illuminating experience, the book will seem another example of social science restating the familiar or the interesting in a way that renders it less significant. And for those who see the aim of academic study clearly separated from a concern for social policy, the book continually violates that norm. With the exception of the last statement, I find the book disappointing on every count. What is missing is a framework that more satisfactorily accounts for the complex, problematic relationships between social and symbolic systems, particularly for systems involving both mediated and nonmediated communication.

**References**


- Mead, Margaret, and Rhoda Metraux 1950 *The Study of Culture at a Distance*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.


