HARVESTING MINDS

How TV Commercials Control Kids

Roy F. Fox

Foreword by George Gerbner

PRAEGER

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Contents

Foreword: Invasion of the Story Sellers

Harvesting young minds for private profit in a field set aside for that purpose and visited voluntarily has its problems. That is why commercials on children's programs are subject to special codes, loose as they are. However, harvesting young minds for private profit in the schools—a public preserve specifically set aside for resisting such blandishments—is more than problematic. It legitimizes an historic departure, with far-reaching implications. I would like to sketch those implications and thus place this ground-breaking book in the broadest human perspective. Our brief journey will look at the distinctive feature of human socialization and its principal transformations, leading us to the predicament we confront today.

Most of what we know, or think we know, we have never personally experienced. We live in a world erected by the stories we hear and see and tell. Unlocking incredible riches through imagery and words, conjuring up the unseen through art, creating towering works of imagination and fact through poetry, song, tales, reports, and laws—that is the *true* magic of human life.

Through that magic we live in a world much wider than the threats and gratifications of the immediate physical environment, which is the world of other species. In our world, stories socialize us into roles of gender, age, class, vocation, and lifestyle, offering us models of conformity or targets for rebellion. Stories weave the seamless web of our cultural environment, cultivating most of what we think, what we do, and how we conduct our affairs.

This story-telling process used to be handcrafted, homemade, and community inspired. Now it is mostly mass-produced and policy-driven. It is the end result of a complex manufacturing and marketing process. This situation demands a new diagnosis.

The stories that animate our cultural environment have three distinct but related functions: 1) *they reveal how things work*; 2) *they describe what things are*, and 3) *they tell us what to do about them.*

Stories of the first kind, which reveal how things work, illuminate the all-important but invisible relationships of life. They help us perceive the invisible and hidden dynamics of daily reality. Fairy tales, novels, plays, comics, cartoons, and other forms of narrative imagination and imagery are the basic building blocks of human understanding. They show complex causality by presenting imaginary action in total situations, coming to some conclusion that has a moral purpose and a social function. You don't have to believe the "facts" of Little Red Riding Hood to grasp the notion that big bad "wolves" victimize old women and trick little girls—a lesson in gender roles, fear, and power. Stories of this kind build, from infancy on, the fantasy we call reality. I do not suggest that the revelations are false, which they may or may not be, but that they are synthetic, selective, often mythical, and always socially constructed.

Stories of the second kind depict what things are. These are descriptions, expositions, and reports abstracted from total situations, which fill in with "facts" the gaps in the fantasies conjured up by stories of the first kind. They are the presumably factual accounts—the chronicles of the past and the news and science of today. Stories of what things are usually confirm some idea of how things work. Their high "facticity" (i.e., correspondence to actual events presumed to exist independently of the story) gives them special status in politics and law. They emphasize and lend credibility to selected parts of each society's fantasies of reality, alerting us to certain interests, threats, opportunities, and challenges.

Stories of the third kind—those which tell us what to do—clinch the lessons of the first two and turn them into action. They typically present us with a valued objective or suggest a need or desire—and then offer a product, service, candidate, institution, or action to help us attain it. For example, the lessons of the fictional Little Red Riding Hoods prominent in everyday media stories not only teach lessons of vulnerability, mistrust, and dependence, but also help sell insurance policies, burglar alarms, and guns.

Hence, stories of the third kind sell ways for us to adjust to our society's structure of power.

Ideally, these three kinds of stories check and balance each other. But in a commercially-driven culture, stories of the third kind pay for most of the first two. This creates a cultural environment which is climate-controlled to breed only stories that sell. In the electronic age, this cultural environment is monopolized, homogenized, and globalized. We must look at the historic course of our journey to see what this new age means for our children.

For the longest time in human history, stories were told only face to face. A community was defined by the rituals, mythologies, and imagery held in common. All useful knowledge was encapsulated in aphorisms and legends, proverbs and tales, incantations and ceremonies. Writing was rare and holy, forbidden for slaves. Laboriously inscribed manuscripts conferred sacred power to their interpreters, the priests and ministers.

State and church ruled the Middle Ages in a symbiotic relationship of mutual dependence and tension. State, composed of feudal nobles, was the economic and political order; church its cultural arm. The industrial revolution changed all of that. One of the first machines stamping out standardized artifacts was the printing press. Its product, the book, was a prerequisite for all the other upheavals to come. The book could be given to all who could read, requiring education and creating a new literate class of people. Readers could now interpret the book (at first the Bible) for themselves, breaking the monopoly of priestly interpreters and ushering in the Reformation.

When the printing press was hooked up to the steam engine, the industrialization of story-telling shifted into high gear. Rapid publication and mass transport created a new form of consciousness: modern mass publics. Publics are loose aggregations of people who share some common consciousness of how things work, what things are, and what ought to be done—but never meet face-to-face. That was never before possible.

Now, stories could be sent—often smuggled—across hitherto impenetrable or closely guarded boundaries of time, space, and status. The book lifted people from their traditional moorings, as the industrial revolution uprooted them from their local communities and cultures. They could now get off the land and go to work in faraway ports, factories, and continents, and have with them a packet of common consciousness—the book, the journal, and later the motion picture—wherever they went. Publics, created by such publication, were necessary for the formation of individual and group identities in the new urban environment, as the different classes and regional, religious, and ethnic groups tried to live together with some degree of cooperation and harmony. Publics were now the basic units of self-government, electing or selecting representatives to an assembly trying to reconcile diverse interests. The maintenance and integrity of multiple publics made self-government feasible for large, complex, and diverse national communities. People engaged in long and costly struggles—now at a critical stage—to be free to create and share stories that fit the reality of competing and often conflicting values and interests. Most of our assumptions about human development and political plurality and choice are rooted in the print era.

One of the most vital provisions of the print era was the creation of the only large-scale folk institution of the industrial society—public education—the community institution where face-to-face learning and interpreting could, ideally, liberate the individual from both tribal and medieval dependencies and cultural monopolies.

The second great transformation, the electronic revolution, has ushered in the telecommunications era. Its mainstream, television, is superimposed upon and reorganizes print-based culture. Unlike the industrial revolution, the new upheaval does not uproot people from their homes, but transports them in their homes. It re-tribalizes modern society and changes the role of education.

For the first time in human history, children are born into homes where mass-mediated storytellers reach them on the average of more than seven hours a day. Most waking hours, and often dreams, are filled with their stories. These stories do not come from families, schools, churches, neighborhoods, and often not even from the native countries. They come from a small group of distant conglomerates with something to sell.

Giant industries discharge their messages into the mainstream of common consciousness. Channels proliferate and new technologies pervade home and office while mergers and bottom-line pressures shrink creative alternatives and reduce diversity of content. The historic nexus of church and state is replaced by television and state. These changes may appear to broaden and enrich our horizons, but they also homogenize our viewpoints and limit our alternatives. For media professionals, the changes mean fewer opportunities and greater compulsions to present life in saleable packages. Creative artists, scientists, and humanists can still explore, enlighten, and sometimes even challenge, but increasingly, their stories must fit marketing strategies and priorities.

Despite being surrounded with sales messages, or perhaps because of it, a Consumer Federation of America survey concluded in 1990 that "Americans are not smart shoppers and their ignorance costs them billions, threatens their health and safety and undermines the economy. . . ." Viewing commercials is "work" performed by audiences in exchange for "free" news and entertainment. But in fact we pay dearly to subsidize commercial media through a surcharge added to the price of every advertised product. We also pay dearly by allowing advertising expenditures to be tax-deductible business expenses. These give-aways of public moneys for private purposes erode the diversity of our cultural mainstream.

Broadcasting is the most concentrated, homogenized, and globalized medium. The top 100 advertisers pay for two-thirds of all network television. Four networks, allied to giant transnational corporations—our private "Ministry of Culture"—control the bulk of production and distribution, and shape our cultural mainstream. Other interests, minority news, and the potential of any challenge to dominant perspectives, lose ground with every merger.

All of this leaves education as the only large-scale institutional corrective capable of reordering priorities and cultivating within students some sense of detached, analytical skill. We have to depend upon public education—as we have since it was founded—to play a liberating role. Education must restore a balance of stories of all three kinds, to stimulate a skeptical and critical view. Education must illuminate—rather than promote—the dominant role of the stories that sell.

But what happens when the historically protected and increasingly valuable sphere of the public classroom is invaded by the very images and messages that it should help students to evaluate? The remarkable and timely study that follows addresses that question. So let the story begin.

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