

Mass Media—and Schools

*"The children with whom
we deal are people, too!"*

A FEW weeks ago, an enterprising eighth grade class gave a surprise "non-birthday" party for its teacher, because her birthday is in August and the class obviously could not give her a party then. The party was a complete surprise to the teacher; in fact she began to wonder whether she was losing her grip, as her antennae had not picked up any differences in the air of the classroom or the behavior of the students, as teachers' antennae usually do. It was, in the eyes of the young adolescents who had prepared it, a successful party.

There was much food and drink; there was a truly surprised teacher; and then, there was a rather dragging lull—until some child said, "Let's turn on TV." This they did and watched reruns of "The Millionaire" and "The Loretta Young Theatre"—the only programs available at that particular hour.

Part of the way through one of the programs the teacher, mindful of a possible teaching situation, snapped off the set during a commercial and offered to the class her interpretation of the way

in which she predicted the story would be worked out. This kind of plot, of course, is not difficult to foresee, once the characters have appeared and the situation has been outlined, particularly in the type of programs they were watching. Fortunately, her analysis had been correct; some of the children had agreed with her, but they watched to the end, anyway, possibly to validate their predictions.

Later in the school year, as they were planning a holiday party together, they decided they should also plan some entertainment, along with the food and drink that seem so essential to parties for early adolescents. As one child said, "Last time we had a good party, and it was fun, *but all we did was watch TV.*"

Yes, they are with us now in the school; the children to whom television is a commonplace. They have grown up with it; they have gone through the various stages of its fascination for them; they probably watch it about two hours a day on the average, as studies indicate; they no longer regard it as a new experience, but rather as just another of the many mass media with which they have become familiar in their lifetime. Teachers too are familiar with the outward effects. There is the "Ooh-ooh!" on Mondays left over from Toody's exclamations Sunday evening. There are the sometimes wild stories we receive, based on

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Friday night's late, late horror show. And there is the incongruity of seeing today's thirteen-year-old give a perfect imitation of the James Cagney of our youth! To switch to radio for a moment, there is also the discovery of terrific "new" singers. One junior high school girl recently spent half an hour extolling the virtues of her new discovery to her grandmother; the new discovery was Al Jolson!

What Are the Effects?

Ordinarily, in discussing a subject that has to do with children, it is possible to find a statement by Plato or Benjamin Franklin or Horace Greeley, quote it, and then give its source and date. With a subject such as the effect of the mass media upon children, this technique cannot be applied. The mass media most used by today's children have come to fruition only in the past half-century; if we limit ourselves to movies, comic books, radio and television, we can reduce that time to the past quarter century.

One of the classic examples of the effect of mass media upon people relates back to the Orson Welles radio production of an invasion from Mars. Although there were continued explanations throughout the program that the broadcast was merely a play, panic resulted in many areas of the country. People packed a few things and "headed for the hills"; others prepared to defend themselves in their homes; still others jammed the switchboards of radio stations, police stations, newspapers, to learn what the progress of the invasion was.

Panic is fortunately a rare result of a mass media presentation. An example that may seem ridiculously simple might

be the rash of Davy Crockett hats and outfits and the popular song that accompanied the Walt Disney production about this popular hero. Another could be the rapid swish-swish-swish as children pretended to cut the Z that was identified with Zorro.

The effects, or examples, given thus far are all outward; what happens to the person? To this question, we have as yet no complete answer. Let us say immediately that of the dire effects prophesied at the advent of television, radio, comic books, movies and the like, very few, if any, have come to pass. Children have not "ruined" their eyes by watching, nor their ears by listening, even if they seemingly must turn the sound of the radio, phonograph or television to its fullest number of decibels; rather, it is we adults who are affected by this. There is a theory that indicates that youngsters play instruments loudly as a way of helping themselves get rid of their extra energy. Their noise-saturation point is apparently much higher than that of adults.

Experts Differ

Children have not stopped reading "good" books, whatever these may be. In fact, librarians report that they are receiving more requests for books because the youngsters are interested in following further something they have seen on television or heard on radio.

Children have not, as a whole, given up their active outdoor play. Generally they take the time for televisioning from other passive interests they may have.

Children who come from homes in which reading is important have not gone over to the so-called comic books. They may read these for a time—but they return to real books when they find

that the comics are not satisfying their needs. Comics, however, may be satisfying needs for children who do not read very well. And in these cases, who is to say they should return to failure experiences, and give up completely the success experiences they may be having with the comics. That is, of course, if they are really using comic books, and not the horror tales that are published as comics.

Moving just slightly from comic books, let us consider the magazine that goes by the name of *Mad*. It is hoped that no one connected in any capacity with the public schools missed the issue in which "Parents' Night" or "Open House" was satirized. In fact, this commentary was almost too pointed to be appreciated by those school people who consider that public institutions should be sheltered from the barbs of critics or satirists. Likewise, travelers, particularly those who go abroad in groups, would have enjoyed the issue that satirized such activities, and developed a tour for plumb-ers! *Mad* has some very good points; it is much more conducive to cooperation and to learning to say, "What is good in this issue?" than to stride across the classroom, seize the offending magazine, and rip it to shreds. Children *know* that some of their teachers enjoy satire; they themselves can be taught to understand and appreciate it, too.

One other thing we have found from the research on effects of mass media is this: nearly always only the child who already has problems is likely to be driven to use a solution he has seen on television, read in comic books, or heard on the radio. A child who is well balanced emotionally, who plans his tele-viewing with his family, who watches programs with his family and discusses these afterward, is much less likely to

be influenced by the violence he may see.

It is only fair to state at this point that some of the "experts" who have studied the effects of mass media upon youngsters disagree with each others' conclusions. Particularly is there disagreement between the clinicians who observe children's behavior over long periods of time, and the experts who rely largely upon responses to questionnaires, structured interviews, and other such instruments designed to elicit information.

Thus far, we have been using the general words, children, youngsters, the child. The statements given have been factual, so far as research has taken us, to this time. Yet any person who has worked with children should certainly be aware that they differ. Possibly the theory of individual differences was one of the first we learned to mouth during our undergraduate preparation for teaching. Certainly children are different. They may respond quite differently to what we may mistakenly call the same stimulus. For it is not necessarily the same stimulus to each child; each child is selective, and his perception of the stimulus may differ considerably from another child's perception.

We say we know that not all the youngsters in our classes learn the same things from lessons we present; this selectivity, this difference in perception is operative also in children's varying reactions to whatever the mass media may present. Shifting to adult reaction for a moment, let us ask ourselves one question here: What group of people reacted most vigorously to the make-up controversy during the debates by the recent presidential candidates? The children probably reflected their parents' feelings, though an eighth grader recently said in class, "I'm a born Republican, but I'm

not really sure that every Republican is good and every Democrat is bad."

In the classroom, we find today children who are much better informed on rockets and jets than their teachers are! We have youngsters who have had many vicarious experiences such as seeing the President of the United States, the Coronation of Queen Elizabeth II, the World Series, the Tournament of Roses Parade, professional football and basketball, opera, drama—the list could go on and on. This should not be interpreted as their having shared a common background of experience, for they have each selected, perceived and individualized these experiences as they watched and listened. As many of us have learned, however, information and vicarious experience can be miseducative; the experiences children have with the mass media are not necessarily educative. To move off on a small tangent, most people use television, radio, magazines, comic books, for entertainment, rather than educative purposes.

The educative possibilities are there, even now, though they may have to be sought among the rash of westerns, doctors and nurses, situation comedies, and variety shows. Teachers and parents can help children develop taste and discrimination as they work with the output of the mass media that is available. As Katy said last year during a discussion of educational TV, "You have to have a teacher to tell you what you saw." This statement may be fully as applicable to the relevant commercial programs.

Let us remember that mass media, by their very name, are for the mass of people. No one story will please everyone, whether it be written to be read, to be heard, or to be seen and heard. Let us also remember that the children with whom we deal are people, too.

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