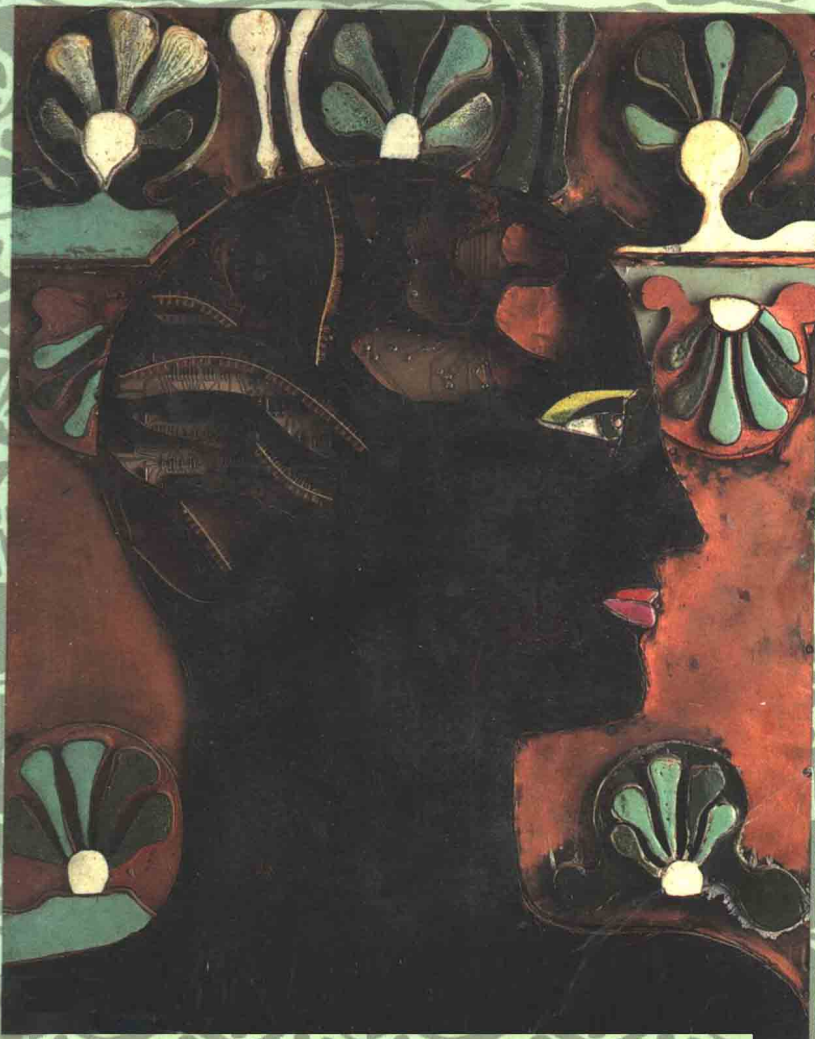


# IMPACT MASS MEDIA

**CURRENT ISSUES**

**SECOND EDITION**



**RAY  
ELDON  
HIEBERT**

**CAROL  
REUSS**

# **IMPACT OF MASS MEDIA**

**CURRENT ISSUES**

**SECOND EDITION**

*Edited by*

**Ray Eldon Hiebert**

*University of Maryland*

**Carol Reuss**



**Longman**

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## **Impact of Mass Media, Second Edition**

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# Introduction

In the preface to the first edition of this book, we pointed out that, because of his communication abilities, Ronald Reagan is uniquely qualified to exercise political power as the president of the United States for most of the decade of the eighties. The 1980s, we said, are the age of mass communication, and President Reagan's background and experience have trained him not for law or statesmanship or management but, rather, for dealing with reporters and editors and producers, the gatekeepers of the mass media. He knows how to play to the masses through the cameras of the media.

Toward the end of his two terms in office, however, even President Reagan couldn't control the news media when the White House blundered in trading arms for hostages held in Iran and let that ransom be sent to aid the Contras in Nicaragua, in contradiction to American foreign policy and congressional legislation.

By focusing their efforts on this scandal, the news media put the issue on the public agenda. And the public reacted by losing some faith in the president who until then could hardly seem to do any wrong.

The story of the Reagan administration is important to any study of the impact of mass communication in the 1980s because it illustrates so many facets of the problem. On the one hand, there are people who would give the press credit for exercising ultimate power. "The press giveth and the press taketh away," they would say. On the other hand, some would say that the press was the victim—first of the president, who used the media for his own gain, and then of the president's supporters, who blamed the media for crippling an innocent man.

These are the kinds of argument that the subject of mass media impact has launched. But what are the answers? What is the truth? Is it possible to arrive at a satisfactory conclusion? We cannot argue with the fact that the mass media have played an important role in shaping politics in America, perhaps even in shaping America. The dominant medium today—television—has changed much in America in its ascendancy starting in the early 1950s.

Questions about the precise impact of mass media remain unanswered. We know that the mass media have an impact, but just how and why and what remain elusive. Behavioral scientists are examining the effects of mass media; we know that we can predict certain outcomes in certain situations. But the variables are numerous. Two social scientists, Bernard Berelson and Morris Janowitz, summarized knowledge about the effects of mass media in their book *Reader in Public Opinion and Communication* (Free Press, 1966):

The effects of communication are many and diverse. They may be short-range or long-run. They may be manifest or latent. They may be strong or weak. They may derive from any number of aspects of the communication content. They may be considered as psychological or political or economic or sociological. They may operate upon opinions, values, information levels, skills, taste, or overt behavior. (p. 379)

In other words, it would be difficult to make any sweeping generalizations about the impact of the mass media, even though we know they have impact. And social scientists in the 1980s have not moved much beyond Berelson and Janowitz's statement. The effects of the mass media must be measured and predicted on a case-by-case basis, taking into consideration all the variables in each situation.

This book is not a scientific examination of the specifics of mass media impact. Instead, it presents current arguments about the impact of the mass media by some of the media's leading thinkers, experienced observers, and thoughtful critics.

Questions of mass media impact usually bring about heated debate. The answers are still not agreed to universally, even with increased scientific analysis. This book is about those debates. The arguments raised here may be among the most important questions of our age, because we are all affected by the mass media. And we have all debated these questions ourselves, ever since we emerged from behind the dark glasses of childhood to realize that the TV tube and the silver screen and the printed word may not, after all, represent reality.

When we realize that the illusions we have received from the mass media are exactly that—illusions, not real or accurate or perfectly matched to our perceptions—we become disillusioned. The first time we read a story in the newspaper that describes an event in which we participated or a person we knew, we are likely to say, "Hey, that's not the way it was; I saw it myself and it didn't happen at all like that." The first time we visit a television studio and see the painted sets for the local news show, we say, "I thought that was the real city skyline behind the anchorperson." The first time we go to Washington, D.C., and see the White House, we remark, "How small it is! It seemed so much bigger on TV."

This book is about the illusions we get from the mass media and our

disillusionment when we find out that everything isn't the way we thought it was. Dispelling these illusions may be one of the most important responsibilities of education. In America today young people spend more time in front of the television set than they do in classes. By the time the average American graduates from high school, he or she will have spent about 12,000 hours in class and about 15,000 hours in front of the TV. The illusions and disillusionments of young people in our society are greater than they have ever been in any society before.

What can we believe? What is true, and what is not? Education must provide a way of answering these questions. We have to be educated about mass media if we want to steer a clear course between illusions, on one side, and disillusionment, on the other.

This book takes up some of the basic issues of the impact of the mass media, issues that are hotly debated; and it examines these issues from several different perspectives. Some of the authors presented here are vigorously in favor of the mass media as they are and set about to defend the media. Others are vigorously opposed to the mass media and criticize their operation. And some try to take a balanced approach. Sixteen different issues are presented here—those that are the most important, and those that are the most often argued.

What are the effects of the mass media on our society? To what extent are we molded and shaped by the media? Are we informed? Or are we manipulated? Are we in control? Or are we merely dancing at the end of strings pulled by mass communicators?

Should the mass media be as free as they are in our society? What rights should they have? And what limits should be placed on them? Should they be responsible to the government? To society? To their listeners and viewers and readers? To themselves?

Are the mass media ethical institutions? What role should ethics play in mass media operations? Where do the mass media overstep ethical boundaries? And what should be done about it when they do?

What about those of us who are not part of the mass media? What rights do we have to communicate to the masses? How can we get access to the media? Or how can we bring pressure on the media to get them to perform in a manner acceptable to us? How can we exercise some control over the process?

And what about crime and violence in the mass media? Have we become a violent society because we read about crime in our newspapers and watch violence on television? Do news stories about rape inspire rapists to action? Do stories about terrorism inspire terrorists? Do stories about airplane hijacking inspire hijackers? Do the mass media create violence in our society by reporting it, or do they merely reflect the violence that is already out there?

Have we become more sexually free because of sexual explicitness in

the mass media? Or are we becoming jaded about sex because of its over-exposure in the mass media?

What have the mass media done to us politically? Can anyone be elected to political office without the endorsement of the mass media? And are the media giving us an accurate picture of our politicians? When we go to the voting booth, can we rely on the information we have received from the mass media?

To what extent does our government control the mass media? And to what extent do the media control our government? To what extent do the media control business, and to what extent does business control the mass media?

Has the nature of war been changed by mass communication? Television certainly was a factor in the war in Vietnam; what role will TV play in future wars?

What about the role of the media in building nationalism and inspiring patriotism? Do the mass media have an obligation to further the cause of the state? In many societies they do, by law. In the United States, freedom of the press has always restricted the legal obligations of the press to support the government, and in fact the press is sometime seen as the enemy; the adversary of government. But the mass media are bigger than America. Their influence and reach are international. What obligations do the media have—in our country and in other countries—to diplomacy, international relations, and cultural imperialism?

Do the mass media present a fair and accurate picture of minorities and women in our society? And are minorities and women adequately represented in the mass media? What are the results of the media's distortions of minority cultures and viewpoints?

How have the mass media affected religion in our culture? And how are religious groups changing in order to use the mass media?

How have the mass media affected our culture as a whole? Are we becoming a classless society as the result of mass media? Are we becoming a tasteless society? Have the mass media brought about a leveling of our culture to the lowest common denominator?

And finally, as the media are changing because of new technologies, what impact will this have on our culture and our society? What will satellites and cable television and laser beams and computers do to us? And what can we do about it, if anything?

There are no clear-cut, final answers to most of these questions. Each individual must ultimately answer these questions for himself or herself. This book does provide a variety of viewpoints on these questions, and it presents facts and ideas that readers can use in reaching their own conclusions.

The age of mass communication has made it possible for us to gain access to far more information than any society ever had. Information is



indispensable to a complex and advanced civilization. We are an information-hungry society; we need an ever-increasing amount of facts in order to maintain and increase our standard of living. Information today is a commodity we are willing to pay for. And the mass media today are not only entertaining the masses; they are selling information as well.

We have often been told that information is power. The question is, what do we have to do to ensure that the information we receive from the mass media will serve our needs, not the purposes of someone else?

This last question too must be answered by each of us individually. This book is designed to help readers formulate their own conclusions about the role of mass media in their lives. Conflicting arguments are often presented here, deliberately. These arguments should be aired and discussed, and new facts and perspectives should be brought to that discussion. Only in this manner will truth emerge from this vast marketplace of facts and ideas—truth for each individual.

Today, the mass media are too important for us not to know where we stand on the issues affected by communication. The mass media are too essential to be ignored. And the issues raised by mass media will no doubt continue to grow in importance in the foreseeable future.