

Great Issues Lecture:
Mass Media and Mass Culture
at The Hopkins Center,
Dartmouth College
November 26, 1962

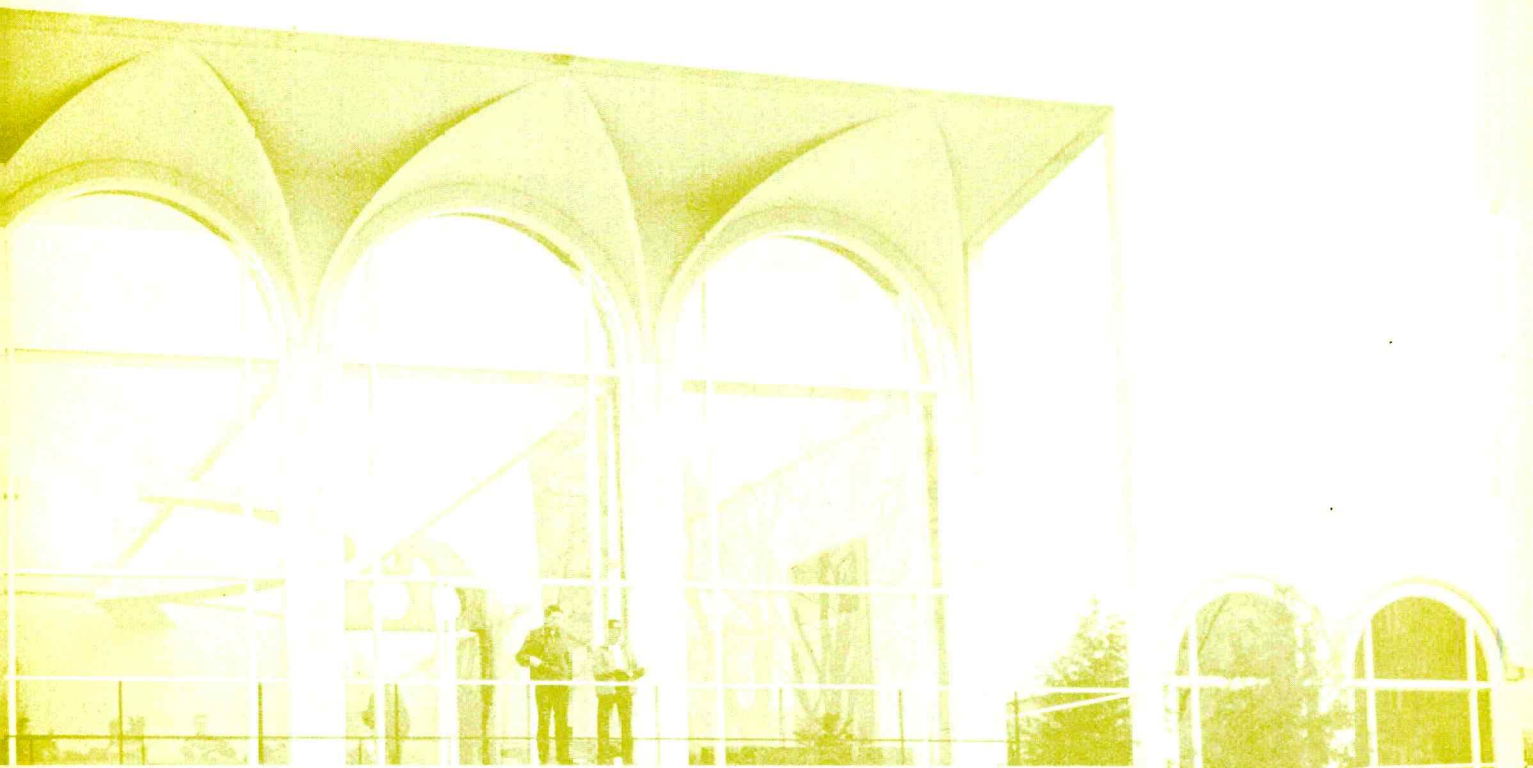
Frank Stanton, President
Columbia Broadcasting System

The Great Issues Course was inaugurated
by President John Sloan Dickey in 1947.
It is based on a series of lectures to Dartmouth
seniors given weekly through the college
year by distinguished visitors to the campus.

A "great" issue is one considered
to have moral core, historical depth,
particular significance for the present
and a probable projection into the future.



Sculpture class, University of Iowa, Iowa City, Iowa.



The subject of your deliberations this week is highly appropriate to the chapter in Dartmouth's history marked by the opening of this promising Center. It is one of the most hopeful signs of our times, I think, that academic institutions all over America are becoming more and more concerned with the arts, both visual and performing. Certainly this enlarged concern, of which this building is a characteristic symbol, is central to any deeper understanding of American culture and of the culture of the twentieth century.

But if you have been apt in your choice of a subject, I am afraid that you have not been unique. There is a great stir going on everywhere about what feature writers like to call the "cultural explosion"—an expression that leaves something to be desired in view of the dictionary definitions of "explosion." Financial pages have probed the commercial implications of increased cultural activity. Philosophers have explored the moral aspects in learned and spirited seminars. Sociologists,



Art Festival, Rochester Art Center, Rochester, Minnesota.

psychologists, historians have given lectures, written books, advanced and attacked theories. Writers have had a field day visiting new deformities upon the English language in such coined words as “masscult,” “midcult” and “highcult” that threaten to survive more for their ugliness than for their relevance.

I think that I have followed most of this discussion—responsible and otherwise—fairly faithfully. It will be no news to you that in my line of work we have not suffered from a shortage of critical attention. And with whatever grace we may appear to accept and—some would say—ignore it, we do occasionally ask ourselves questions about what is happening to our culture and the nature of the effect that the mass media have upon it. I thought I might share with you tonight my own reflections on some of these questions, although you will quickly discover that I do not necessarily have the answers. Here among these silent hills you, who are blessed with more time and more salubrity for pure thought, will, I trust, no later than the end of the academic year, arrive at your own conclusions.

A first and fundamental question is: What is the true extent to which there is an acceleration in cultural activity in this country?

The tools of measurement that we have are far from perfect, but we do have some statistical



The Cascade Symphony Orchestra, Edmonds, Washington.

evidence that is impressive. I am sure that I do not need to warn you that statistics alone do not tell the whole story. But as my predecessor on this platform, Mr. Heckscher, wrote recently, "Yet when all has been said in the way of caution or disparagement, the fact remains that numbers *are* important."

Our population is now growing at an average annual rate of some 1.5 per cent, and of our present population of 186 million, over 70 per cent are 14 years old or older. These figures ought to be kept in mind when considering statistics on cultural activity, for it will be apparent that the increasing rate at which Americans are listening to serious music, looking at fine art, and reading significant books far outpaces the population increase.

The number of symphony orchestras in the United States has increased from 800 in 1952, to 1252 in 1962. Two hundred of these are solidly professional, and nearly 50 of them operate on annual budgets ranging upwards of \$100,000. Nor is this limited to big cities or urban centers; 30 per cent of U. S. symphony orchestras are in communities of no more than 25,000. Attendance at concerts has also risen until today more people attend concerts in America than go to all major and minor league baseball games including the World Series. The audience of the Detroit Symphony Orchestra, for example, rose 130



"The Ballad of Baby Doe." Central City Opera Company, Central City, Colorado.

per cent in the past decade. And when the New York Philharmonic went on a two-month tour in 1960, 100,000 jammed concert halls to hear it.

A survey by Broadcast Music, Inc. reveals that, in March 1962, 1255 AM and 126 FM radio stations, nearly a third of all commercial radio stations in the U. S., programmed a weekly total of 16,748 hours of concert music—an average of 12.1 hours a week. The 1955 survey showed a weekly average of only 6.5 hours.

Ten years ago there were a little over 300 performing opera groups in the U. S.; today there are over 780, both professional and amateur, whose 3700 performances play to capacity audiences each year. Larger communities are building new opera houses at musical centers, largely through popular subscriptions.

Sales of long-playing recordings of serious music have increased 80 per cent in three years, and, according to *Fortune*, now reach 25 million sales a year. The public spends some \$100 million annually on this recorded music—not to mention \$300 million for high fidelity equipment on which to play it. This \$400 million total compares to a Department of Commerce estimate of \$280 million spent a year on admissions to *all* spectator sports in America.

In the visual arts, such evidences of popular interest as museum attendance is extremely



Portland Museum of Art, Portland, Maine.

persuasive. In New York, attendance at the Metropolitan Museum of Art has risen 200 per cent since 1950. Translated into numbers, this means that people are going to the Metropolitan Museum at an annual rate of 5 million visits. The Metropolitan's experience is being duplicated and even surpassed all over the country, with some 60 million visits to our museums and galleries yearly. And since government funds for the fine arts are very limited, these people are also providing the lion's share of the \$300 million necessary to maintain these institutions.

Nor has reading become a lost pursuit in our country. Over a billion books are now bought each year, and 800 million are borrowed from public libraries as compared to 500 million in 1956. Paperbacks, which sold over 300 million copies in 1961, will number 21,000 titles in 1962 as compared to 15,000 in 1961, and these include not only the classics of literature, history and philosophy but also virtually every book of serious creative effort and comment that has been published in recent years in hardbacks.

To supplement all these statistics, and to refute the charge, that, like raspberry jam, the farther culture is spread the thinner it gets, we should take a brief look at some other data. Harold Lasswell, a pioneer student of communications, has said there are five stages in communication: attention,



National Music Camp, Interlochen, Michigan.

comprehension, enjoyment, evaluation and action. The statistics we have been using reveal no more than attention. Let us now move to the other end of Mr. Lasswell's spectrum, to action.

In the field of music, there were in 1950, the American Music Conference reports, 21 million musical instruments owned and presumably played by Americans. Today there are about 37,500,000—an increase of over 76 per cent. The number of amateur musicians in the same period has risen from 19 million to 33 million—a rise of 73 per cent compared to a population rise of 22 per cent. This means that one out of five Americans plays a musical instrument. And although some of it may be at times an assault on the ear, that the instrumentalists are presumably competent enough to participate in combinations seems to me apparent from the fact that school bands and orchestras alone have doubled in number since World War II. And it *is* action: it involves spending time, money and effort.

Similarly, in the visual arts, members of the Metropolitan Museum—as distinguished from those who only visit it—have increased 100 per cent over the last decade. Substantially more slides are borrowed; more photographs and photostats are sold; more lectures are attended.

In books, the persistence with which canny publishers put out competing paperback editions



A. J. Bayless Supermarket, Scottsdale, Arizona.

of Plato and Homer, Shakespeare and Milton, and sell them in drug stores, variety stores and at airport newsstands shows that somebody is buying them. No one has ever claimed there is much snobbery in buying paperback books—they are hardly designed for conspicuous or impressive display—but I am thoroughly convinced too that few expensive books are bought as cocktail table furniture. There may be an occasional purchase with such a purpose, but that kind of market would soon be glutted. Last year there were 539 new titles in art books, as against 317 in 1950. One publisher a few seasons ago was astonished to find that his \$30 volume on the Robert Woods Bliss collection of pre-Columbian art was sold out within a week of publication.

Although all of this may not be final proof that we are on the verge of a new renaissance, I think that it at least establishes the premise that we live in a period of increasing cultural interest that is not mere lip service but genuine and active.

Let me raise the point of the effect of the mass media on our cultural life and, the opposite side of the coin which is less often examined, the effect of our cultural life on our mass media. I will be the first to admit that we don't know enough about either side of this matter. I see several questions here. One is this: Is the increased attention directed to the appreciation of the arts



Virginia Museum of Fine Arts' artmobile at Shenandoah, Virginia.

and to the acquisition of knowledge due, to any considerable degree, to the mass media?

The answer is to some extent implicit in the premises. The mass media must by definition deal with very large and inclusive groups of our population, and all of them together reach virtually all groups. If on any very broad front there is a great increase in popular attention to any aspect of life or increased activity in it, there is inevitably some relation to the mass media. With regard to the arts and knowledge specifically, it is the mass media that have brought an intensified awareness of the art or knowledge, made it more generally available and usually done both. And these are the minimum essentials of any widespread cultural activity: awareness and availability.

If we consider music, it seems to me obvious that both radio and, to a lesser extent, television, have brought an awareness of fine music into millions of homes. The proliferation of standard radio stations, the increase of FM operations, the economic revolution in radio—all these factors have put music back into radio; and the fragmentation of the audience has made it possible for many stations, particularly FM, to devote the major segments of their schedules to serious music, creating and broadening public awareness of it. Television, though more sporadically, has also made the public



New York Philharmonic at Las Vegas, Nevada.

aware of the pleasures of listening.

When Leonard Bernstein reported the reception that the Philharmonic got on its tour, he said that there was “an explanation other than musicianship to explain the extraordinary enthusiasm” of the audience. “You can’t imagine,” he said, “how we have been gathered in by audiences that obviously knew about us through television.” In some places the audiences stood and cheered for minutes before the orchestra had played a note. In Las Vegas, whose cultural opulence doesn’t always run in traditional channels, and where no major symphony had performed before, a hall holding 7000 was jammed. I do not know that the highest level of musical discrimination has been reached by audiences that silence an orchestra with their cheers before hearing it play; but we are talking of awareness here, and these people were well aware of the Philharmonic. I doubt if awareness of the Philharmonic extended much beyond the Hudson fifty years ago.

The opening of Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts last September provides another revealing example of how television can increase the awareness of a vast public. Some 25.6 million television viewers in America saw and heard some part of the two-hour concert, in contrast to the 2600 who attended the



Opening night, Philharmonic Hall, Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts, New York City.

concert that night in Philharmonic Hall. During the 1961-62 season, the CBS Television Network broadcast six special programs of the Philharmonic during prime evening hours with an average rating for the six hours of 8.9, which means that some 4.3 million sets were tuned in to the concert during the average minute. Just as, according to Leonard Bernstein, television must be credited for the popular reception of the Philharmonic on tour, it seems probable that the television appearances of the orchestra have helped stimulate the popular interest that has led to the more than one million sales of Philharmonic record albums.

The availability of fine music has been immeasurably increased by the long-playing, high fidelity record. The average cost, per minute of playing time, to a member of the Dartmouth Class of 1939, for a recording of Beethoven's "Eroica" Symphony was 25.2 cents. Since that symphony takes 50 minutes, your hard-pressed predecessors paid something like \$14 for a cumbersome album of the entire symphony. The cost to you for the same symphony, by the same orchestra, is about eight cents per minute of playing time. And it is now possible to get an Lp recording of the whole symphony for around \$4.

It is an incomparably better recording, with a far longer, useful life. Your fathers listened to mechanical approximations of an orchestra



Igor Stravinsky recording his ballet music for "Noah and the Flood."

playing a symphony. You listen to a faithful play back of the actual performance. Moreover, the weight and bulk of your records are not so great that you have to limit your collections, neither will they crack on the slightest pressure nor melt like one of Dali's timepieces if left in the sun.

Long-playing records not only make fine musical performances available to great numbers of people wherever they live, but they also furnish wider audiences to new composers. In April 1962, the inclusive *Schwann Long Playing Record Catalog* listed 1878 works of 483 contemporary composers, as compared to 504 works of 49 composers of the age of Beethoven. There is an hospitable enthusiasm for contemporary composers, and the last generation's avant-garde is today's historic survival.

The nature of the visual arts does not permit a wholly comparable experience. It does not seem to me that the reproduction of a great painting can yet come as close to the original as do the high fidelity recordings of great musical performances. Nevertheless, such innovations in printing techniques as the electronic scanning of color values has brought about a kind of visual high fidelity that has made possible far more exact reproductions of paintings. *Life* publishes some 500 art pictures a year, many in very faithful color reproductions. In most cases these are based on



Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City.

current exhibits, special shows or the permanent collections of American museums—as, for example, the 400-artist collection of the Carnegie International Exhibition of Art, the traveling exhibition of the national treasures of Thailand, and the Detroit Institute of Art’s memorable Flemish masterpieces exhibit, which was seen by some 100,000 visitors.

I don’t think that looking at reproductions in the pages of a book or magazine can ever equal looking at an original painting. There are too many matters of texture and scale involved. But it can open up new awarenesses. If millions of people see a painting in *Life*, hundreds of thousands are going to seek out originals in museums and galleries. Prominent accounts in the mass media of the purchase of Rembrandt’s “Aristotle Contemplating the Bust of Homer,” for \$2.3 million, brought scores of thousands into the Metropolitan Museum in New York, probably out of curiosity; but long after the sensationalism had worn off, the increased attendance held up. Attendance at the Museum has soared 40.7 per cent since the acquisition, and *The New York Times* reports, “Books about Rembrandt are selling furiously.” Visitors may have come to stare, but they stayed to appreciate and to learn.

The part that television plays in this process of increasing cultural awareness is still the



Live television broadcast of "The Heiress," based on the HENRY JAMES novel, "Washington Square."

subject of tentative probings by the social scientists. The bills of particulars range all the way from a determining effect to a deterring effect to no effect at all. I have put myself in the enviable position of raising questions tonight rather than answering them, and I will make no claims for television. On the other hand, it may be useful to you to consider with me some factors that I hope will help you arrive at your own answers.

The chairman of the American Library Association's broadcasting committee has said, "Dramatization of classics on TV inspires people to read or re-read the classics. And public affairs documentaries have been sending people back to history books . . . We look upon television as a tremendous motivational force. And we haven't even scratched the surface." A monthly bulletin of the New York Board of Education published the results of a survey of 73 library systems across the country and concluded, "Television encourages more reading . . . any story which appears on television creates a demand for the book."

These findings fly in the face of the argument that the reason why better books are being bought and borrowed is that television provides all the escape that cheap reading matter once provided. The Modern Library edition of James's *The Turn of the Screw* was sold out because



Shakespeare's "The Merchant of Venice," Central Park, New York City.

of a television play based on it—not in spite of it. Stendhal's *The Red and the Black* reached unheard of sales during the first week of SUNRISE SEMESTER's program on comparative literature. An hour-long reading of the works of 23 American poets on the CBS Television Network in August this year brought 34,000 requests for bibliographies.

Television is, to be sure, escape entertainment for millions just as circulating library romances and magazine fiction once were to a greater extent than at present. But the customer who went out for a copy of Ethel M. Dell did not pick up a copy of Proust at the same time. On the other hand, millions who look at a situation comedy on television have frequent access also to such experiences as a Shakespearean play, a ballet, and a discussion of economic warfare. In the New York area alone last June, over 1,600,000 people saw a two-and-a-half hour production of *The Merchant of Venice* on WCBS-TV.

But culture is not a matter only of the arts. It also involves knowledge—and this is an age when new areas of knowledge are opening up at an unprecedented pace. At CBS, the range of news and public affairs broadcasts is constantly broadening. We are no longer satisfied with only front page stories—virtually the whole range of the



CBS Reports: "Storm over the Supreme Court."

human experience is now included. Early in 1963, for example, an insight into the character of the Russian people will be provided our audiences through an hour-long prime time special broadcast of dramatized excerpts from five great Russian works of fiction ranging chronologically from Gogol to Pasternak.

Also early next year, CBS REPORTS will present, in two hour-long broadcasts, an account of the development of the United States Supreme Court, with extensive excerpts from its most significant decisions.

I am aware that some of these remarks on mass media and culture may have been overburdened with specifics and not enough concerned with general principles. I share with you the desire to raise more general questions and also the inability fully to answer them.

Paramount among them is this: Are we not in this age encountering a whole new kind of cultural activity—unique to our times and to the conditions of life today? Historically, there have been—since ancient times—two audiences for the arts. One has been the patron—a rich individual or institution that supported the arts and also, frequently in the least attractive sense, patronized them. The other was the simple folk art, to a great extent functional, that grew out of the ordinary daily requirements of life—



Helen Frankenthaler, San Francisco.

pottery, work chants, artifacts. The first was a sparse world, rare in artists and rare in audiences. The second was large, but slow in progress and limited in range. And there was nothing between.

Cultural activity is no longer split into two isolated levels of the population. There was the great art, access to which was generally restricted to the few at the top, and there was the minor art for the many at the bottom. The void between began to fill only when progress in universal education, in economic feasibility, and in technical innovations made great art interesting and accessible to the many. Now cultural activity of variety and depth has become the common heritage and the common quest of all the people.

Millions of people become acquainted with a new painter in the pages of a magazine. Millions hear a new composition on radio. Millions meet a new author on television. Although it is by now a commonplace, or regarded as “unknowable,” it is still significant to recall that more people in a single night saw *Hamlet* on television than it is estimated had seen it in live performances since it was written.

The very dimensions of what we are witnessing have dislocated, I think, all our old standards. We have not had the time yet to produce the artists—writers, composers, and painters—necessary to feed this gargantuan appetite. We have not yet



Red Skelton.

worked out patterns of exposure for many of those that we do have. We are restless because television has not yet achieved as consistent a flow of programs of high cultural level in the arts as it has achieved in information, just as we have sometimes been restless because the printing press has produced a greater volume of passing trivia than of works of high and lasting merit.

There are, of course, some practical work-a-day factors that help to account for this situation. The processing of the raw materials of news broadcasts is responsive to organizational efforts: we can set up procedures, devise techniques and assemble staffs to provide a steady flow of top informational broadcasts. It is an intellectual process. But the top level program in the arts—the absorbing drama, the inspired comedy, the moving composition—cannot be brought about by organizing or planning or devising. They have to come from the vision, the flash of light, the wild surmise of the individual artist. You don't know where he is, what he is doing, or even if he exists.

But I think that we have a more essential, more basic dilemma even than this. Compared to the total human experience and the long chronicles of the arts and human culture, the mass media are very, very young. And mass communications are much more advanced as mass transmission than as



Music students, Irwin, Iowa.

mass interchange. For the major extent of civilized history the artist was in the company of his audience. The artist and his patron, the minstrel and his circle of listeners, the players and their little audiences, even the news criers and those who gathered in the town squares to hear—all these represented opportunities for the originators and transmitters of material to establish a rapprochement with their audiences, to pace themselves, to see what interested and what paled, to note when a phase was over and there was a need to move on to something else.

There have always been two ends to communication—the sender and the receiver; otherwise there is no communication.

The painting of pictures that no one sees may be expression but it is not communication.

“To have great poets,” said Whitman, “there must be great audiences, too.” We must know also whether we are reaching them, are in league with them and not so far ahead or so far behind that no one is paying any attention.

From their very nature, the mass media suffer from an indirectness and a lack of immediacy in getting audience response. A greater degree and a longer period of trial and error are involved in learning about audiences than has been the case over the ages when sender and receiver were at the same spot and usually in



Teenage autograph hunters surrounding maestro Thomas Schippers, Brooklyn, New York.

the same room. Those of you interested in the performing arts are well aware, I am sure, that there are great performances and lackluster performances of the same play by the same performers in the same theatre the same week. This is generally the result of the spark that is struck between the performer and his audience. Nightclub performers handle their material as they go along to match the mood and responsiveness of their audiences. The improvised theatre, which has attained a considerable following both here and abroad, carries this performer-audience relationship back to the directness that was once the basis for all theatrics.

What we in the mass media have to work with, in gaging the responsiveness of audiences, is still far from perfect. We can make some assumptions from statistics. Obviously, if only a few viewers are looking at your program and many more at someone else's or not at any, there is something wrong. The broadcaster—not the audience—is out of step. And the realities of the mass media are not such that you can say that it is good enough to speak to an interested few. The whole structure of mass communications is based on the unit cost of bringing great art, great entertainment and great informational material to millions.



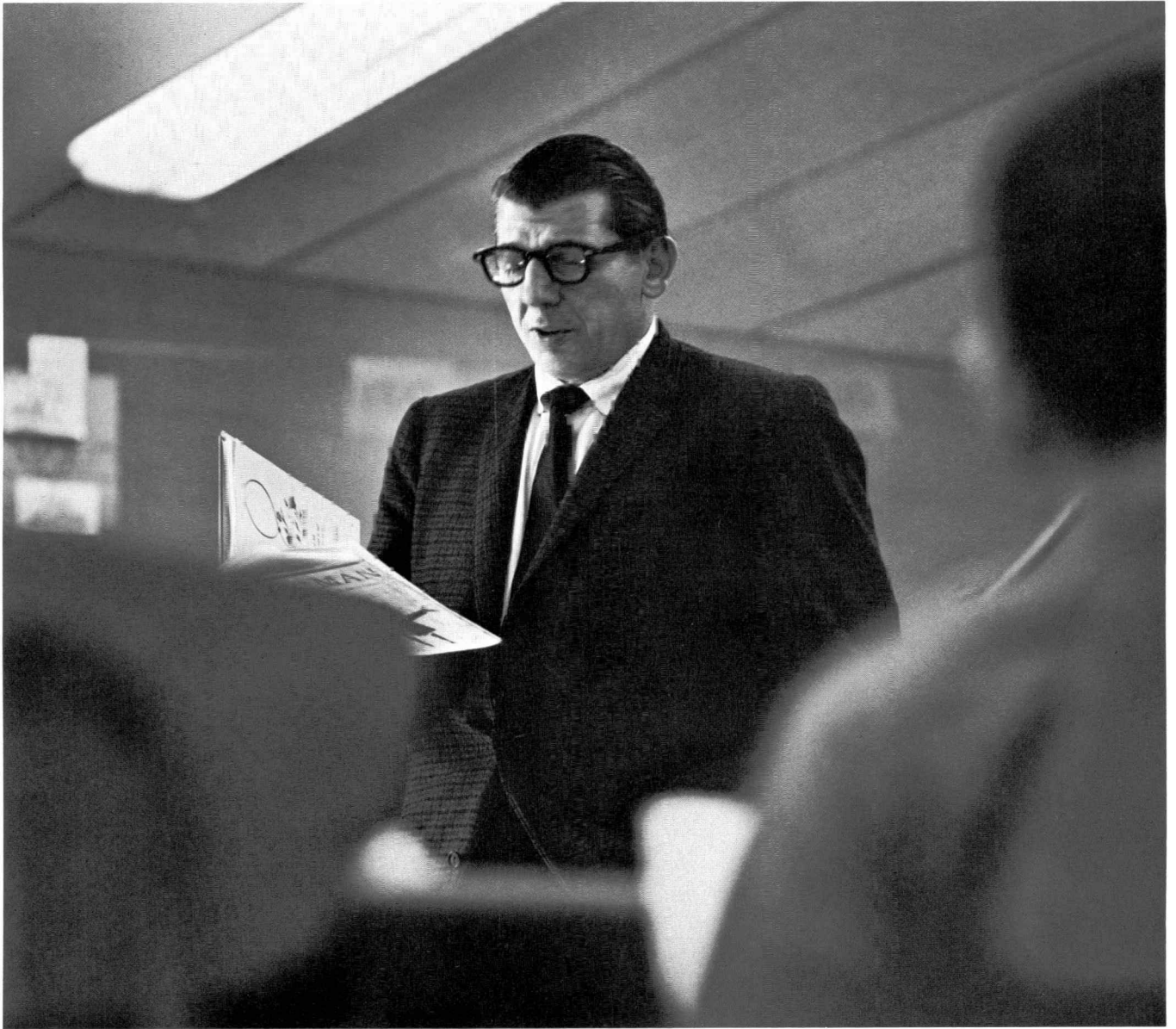
Civic Ballet Corps, the Arts Council, Winston-Salem, North Carolina.

If you reduce your audience from the many to the few, then the structure collapses. Moreover, in television, we occupy a limited number of channels and we must respect our obligation to the majority even though we cannot ignore minorities.

Like Whitman's poetry, then, mass media must have responsive audiences. To support the media's necessarily giant costs and, in the case of television, to justify the occupation of scarce commercial channels, they must be large audiences. And yet there is all the need for movement, for flexibility, for rapprochement in the relationship of mass media to their audiences as there was in the case of the minstrel or the crier. Indeed the penalty for consistent failure is far more devastating.

I suggest that the great challenge to the whole advancement of the mass media's contribution to our cultural life lies in the inroads that your generation can make on this problem of the relationship between the media and the audience. Of all the questions I have put tonight, this is by far the most perplexing.

There is for example, the problem of pacing the interpolation of serious and minority interest programs in a schedule that must on the whole appeal to much greater numbers. One program in the schedule affects adjacent programs, and if we broadcast a program



Poet and critic, John Ciardi, host of the television series, "Accent."

of high cultural value but limited interest, our audiences do not shrink just for that one program but for those following it. And they do not come all the way back during the same period the next week. Unless we handle this phenomenon with great caution, we could get into sufficient economic trouble to discourage us from doing any experimental or limited interest programs.

There is also the problem of understanding better the variety, the intensity and steadfastness of the motives of the audience in looking at television. How much are they really creatures of habit? How firmly are they really attached to their surface interests? How venturesome are they, how often ready for something new, under what circumstances, and at what times?

We do not have a sufficiently clear understanding of all this. Nor, for that matter, do we have a sufficiently clear understanding of the origins of tastes and the mechanisms by which they may be developed. Some researchers have claimed that the intellectual and cultural tastes of the majority are relatively limited, and that this majority is not likely to expose itself to material on the higher aesthetic and intellectual levels, or, if it is so exposed, that it is unlikely to develop tastes for such material merely as a result of exposure. To whatever degree this is true, mass media must look for assistance to other institutions where



Amateur art group, Roswell Museum and Art Center, Roswell, New Mexico.

tastes are born—to the family, to the school, and to other primary groups. This whole question of how tastes are created and developed is one of the topics to which we at CBS plan to devote considerable research attention. And this is one of the reasons why we recently established within CBS a department of social research.

We are constantly striving to improve quantitative measurement techniques, and we are making concentrated efforts as well to devise reliable qualitative measurements of audience reactions. We are trying to understand trends better, and to determine their meaning and their depth. We want to know more, with more certainty. We need to know—with less costly trial and error, if it's possible—how far and how fast we can go in doing new things in new ways.

I hope very much that those of you whose imaginations are fired by the unlimited possibilities of the mass media in enriching our cultural life will, in the years to come, address your minds and ingenuity to these problems. There seems to me no area in which you can spend your time, your talents and your energies with more promise.

And now that I have given you an assignment that surpasses anything, I am sure, with which your faculty has afflicted you, I will not detain you further. You haven't a minute to lose if you are going to tackle it successfully.

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- 49 The Metropolitan Museum of Art, *op. cit.*, p. 39.
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- 51 Cited by Marie Torre, "TV—Radio Today," *New York Herald Tribune*, (April 12, 1961) , p. 28.
- 52 "Reading on the Rise," *Time*, Vol. 76, No. 4, (July 25, 1960) , p. 44.
- 53 Bennett Cerf, President, Random House.
- 54 Grace and Fred M. Hechinger, "Television and Education," *The Eighth Art*, (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1962) , p. 59.
- 55 American Research Bureau—New York Arbitron estimate.
- 56 Daniel Seligman, "We're Drowning in Phony Statistics," *Fortune*, Vol. LXIV, No. 5, (November 1961) , p. 146.

- 57 Based on National Nielsen Television Index figures.
- 58 Walt Whitman, "Ventures on an Old Theme," *The Poetry and Prose of Walt Whitman*, Louis Untermeyer, ed., (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1949), p. 891.
- 59 As an example: during the 1961-62 season, CBS televised six special hour-long broadcasts of the New York Philharmonic Orchestra during prime evening time. The chart below shows the effect of these specials on CBS Television Network's share of audience. The figures are an average of the six broadcasts.

INFLUENCE OF N. Y. PHILHARMONIC BROADCASTS ON
CBS TELEVISION NETWORK'S SHARE OF AUDIENCE
(AVERAGE FOR SIX BROADCASTS)

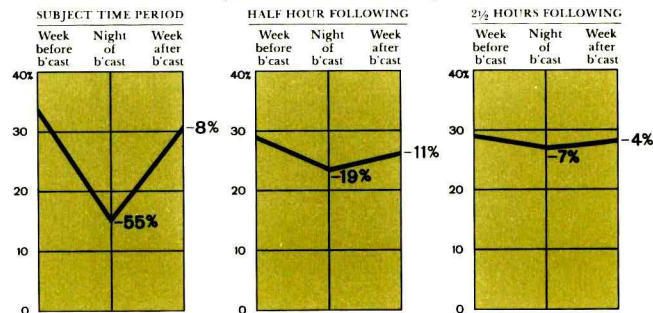


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