



Images and Reality in Society

Part 1

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“It is far easier to develop and project a certain image of yourself to others than it is to actually be that sort of person.”

The word ‘image’ comes from the Latin *‘imago’*, meaning imitation or likeness. It is the likeness of reality, not the real thing itself. As image has come to function in modern society, dealing in images has many advantages over dealing in realities. Two of the main advantages are first, that an imitation is quicker and easier to produce than its corresponding reality and second, that it is much more malleable in your hands than the unyielding real world. Let me give you some illustrations.

It is far easier to develop and project a certain image of yourself to others than it is to actually *be* that sort of person. One can wear the clothes and adopt the swagger and vocabulary of John Wayne much more easily than one can live out the kind of life he did in his films. Likewise, one can project the image of an academic with a different sort of wardrobe and vocabulary much more easily than one can actually *be* a learned person.

Or, take the case of a corporation in building its public image. It is more economical to have the advertising department of a lumber company establish an image of ecological sensitivity and long range responsibility than it is to run the company that way. In fact, it is also more effective, because the public would never be in the position to make such a judgment on the basis of what they observe about practices of reforestation. What the public can do, though, is to form a judgment based on good advertising which shows the company protecting the kind of scenery that the public wants protected. In the same way, a university might well do more for its prestige nationwide by buying a good football team than by upgrading its education.

If an image were a lie, then things would be relatively simple. In the words of Daniel Boorstin, an image “has an ambiguous relationship to reality”¹ It is in that ambiguity that its power lies. The above examples do not constitute direct falsehoods, they have real bearing on reality, but exactly what that bearing is, is very hard to say.

We have shown the advantages of an image for the one who sends or projects it. The critical advantage of image over reality, however, is for the one who receives it. That is to say that we can easily prefer image to reality. The main advantage of an image is that it is simple. It is easily understood and by-passes all the complexities of a real person, corporation or university. If I want to feel that I know a person, or understand a Corporation

or a university, I will find it easy to grasp some kind of an image of them - especially if they have produced one for my consumption. If on the other hand I want to know them as they really are, I have a difficult and complex task ahead of me that may have no end. For most of my decision-making, dealing with the complexity of reality is awkward and unwieldy. This is the seductive side of images, that they enable us to maintain our oversimplified picture of the world and its possibilities for us. Ben Stein wrote in *Saturday Review*:

A writer sold to a TV producer a concept about a generous owner of a small manufacturing company. It came back completely revised, the hero now a villain. He was advised that in TV, businessmen can never be heroes. Another of his story proposals, about a heroic college professor, was turned down by a couple of Hollywood eminences as a complete impossibility. Everyone knew, they said, that professors are either crazy or fags²

Here we have those who control the media letting out only as much reality as they think conforms to the images in the viewers' minds. The viewers, after all, must not be denied the comfort of believing that they understand what is what in the business and academic worlds.

Daniel Boorstin, in his book *The Image*, attributes the power and the confusion of images ultimately to our extravagant expectations. I will quote him at some length:

When we pick up our newspaper at breakfast, we expect - we even demand _ that it bring us momentous events since the night before. We turn on the car radio as we drive to work and expect "news" to have occurred since the morning newspaper went to press. Returning in the evening, we expect our house not only to shelter us. to keep us warm in winter and cool in summer, but to relax us, to dignify us, to encompass us with soft music and interesting hobbies, to be a playground, a theatre and a bar. We expect our two-week vacation to be romantic, exotic, cheap, and effortless. We expect a faraway atmosphere if we go to a nearby place; and we expect everything to be relaxing, sanitary, and Americanized if we go to a faraway place ...

We expect anything and everything. We expect the contradictory and the impossible. We expect compact cars which are spacious; luxurious cars which are economical. We expect to be rich and charitable, powerful and merciful, active and reflective, kind and competitive. We expect to be inspired by mediocre appeals for excellence, to be made literate by illiterate appeals for literacy. We expect to eat and stay thin, to be constantly on the *move* and *ever* more neighborly, to go to the "church of our choice" and yet feel its guiding power over us, to *revere* God and to be God.

Never have people been more the masters of their environment. Yet never has a people felt more deceived and disappointed. For never has a people expected so much more than the world could offer.³

The argument of the book is that reality cannot measure up to our expectations at many levels, but images can. Because we hold so dearly to our expectations, the world of image becomes more real to us than reality itself. The real world becomes gray and bland by comparison. It is our expectations that fuel our image-making; we deceive ourselves and pay others to deceive us.

Boorstin points to a critical shift with what he calls the Graphics Revolution. By this he

means our sudden improved ability to communicate images in the last hundred years. This brief span of time has seen the advent of telegraph, telephone, radio, TV, the still camera, motion pictures, Video tape, high-speed printing and many other inventions transforming our public communication. We will look at a number of areas where this impact has been felt: the news industry, the world of commerce, of politics and of values, but first we will begin with what is in some ways more basic - our idea of our own image.

The Individual World

There are two ways to speak of “self-image.” We have a self-image that is our own picture of ourselves which is quite a private thing, and then there is the self-image that is something we try to project to others. The second is inseparable from the first in the sense that it is never independent of it, but at the same time it is a different thing. It is the impression you try to create of yourself in the minds of others. We vary enormously from one another in the content of this attempted impression, and also in the degree to which we care what others think about us at all. It is this second sense of self-image that I will be concerned with here - the impression that we try to make for others’ benefit, whether it corresponds to our inner experience of ourselves or not.

Erving Goffman in his book, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, cites an example from William Sansom’s novel, *A Contest of Ladies*, which highlights the obsessional nature of some attempts to create an image of ourselves. It tells of an Englishman called Preedy on vacation making his debut on a Spanish beach.

But in any case he took care to avoid catching anyone’s eye. First of all, he had to make it clear to those potential companions of his holiday that they were of no concern to him whatsoever. He stared through them, round them, over them - eyes lost in space. The beach might have been empty. If by a chance a ball was thrown his way, he looked surprised; then let a smile of amusement lighten his face (Kindly Preedy), looked round dazed to see that there *were* people on the beach, tossed it back with a smile to himself and not a smile *at* the people, and then resumed carelessly his nonchalant survey of space.

But it was time to institute a little parade, the parade of the Ideal Preedy. By devious handlings he gave any who wanted to look a chance to see the title of his book - a Spanish translation of Homer, classic thus, but not daring, cosmopolitan too - and then gathered together his beachwrap and bag into a neat sand-resistant pile (Methodical and Sensible Preedy), and tossed aside his sandals (Carefree Preedy, after all).

The marriage of Preedy and the sea! There were alternative rituals. The first involved the stroll that turns into a run and a dive straight into the water, thereafter smoothing into a strong splashless crawl towards the horizon. But of course not really to the horizon. Quite suddenly he would turn onto his back and thrash great white splashes with his legs, somehow thus showing that he could have swum further had he wanted to, and then would stand up a quarter out of water for all to see who it was.

The alternative course was simpler; it avoided the cold water shock and it avoided the risk of appearing too high-spirited. The point was to appear to be so used to the sea, the Mediterranean, and this particular beach, that one might as well be in the sea as out of it. It involved a slow stroll down and into the edge of the water - not even noticing his toes were wet, land and water all the same to *him!* - with his eyes up at the sky gravely surveying portents, invisible to others, of the weather (Local

Fisherman Preedy)⁴

What you observe is two worlds, one in which Preedy thinks, feels and determines what his strategy will be, and the other the acts that he goes through to create a certain impression. Of course there can be a complete discrepancy between the one and the other. We can be in agony inside and project a happy exterior almost as if we were wearing a mask. Goffman calls this process “impression management.”⁵

There has always been a performance aspect to our lives. We cannot help letting the fact that others are observing us influence our actions, and this is not necessarily a bad thing. However, today, with such image-awareness, the usefulness of establishing an image, and the ease of doing it are encouraged and techniques are developed as to how it should be done. Take for example an advertisement for the book *Image Impact* (“Radiate success - America’s top experts reveal their secrets”). It is a book designed “to help you upgrade your image and achieve total confidence in your appearance.” It is by eighteen “image consultants” who will “transform you into an executive head-hunter’s dream.”⁶

The problem is, of course, that if our impression management takes too great a piece of our conscious time and motivation, we go through a total loss of integrity and of individual identity. Our full attention is spent on the mask without thought for what is behind it. The more we live in this direction, the less, in fact, there is behind it. The focus of life is shifted from who I am and what I do to how I can appear, from reality to image. The seductiveness of this drift is that it seems to be an ingenious shortcut to being a whole person, to success, it promises to make good on our expectations.

The News Industry

As we try to evaluate the functioning of images in our society, a good part of the public arena to start in is journalism. Today, the communication of news is both a large industry and also has profound bearing on the course of history.

Daniel Boorstin pointed out that the first newspaper in this country was published in 1690 and was called *Public Occurrences Both Foreign and Domestic*. It was to be published once a month, more often only if “any glut of occurrences should happen.” This is in contrast to a modern paper which may publish up to seven editions a day. In the earlier model, God (and the Devil) made up the news and the reporters simply reported it. If there was little news, or if what there was was not very interesting, it was not the reporter’s fault. Today, however, it is the responsibility of the reporter to make news; if he does not, he is fired. News, according to Boorstin, is after all, anything that makes the reader say, “Gee Whiz.” He points to this change being more far-reaching than simply the growth of one industry - it shows a shift of the idea of truth and reality in our society.

One of the most important categories of Boorstin’s analysis is what he calls a “pseudo-event,” now more sympathetically called a “media event” by the media itself. The main characteristic of a pseudo-event is that it is an event that happens primarily to be reported. The question is not so much whether or not it is true, but whether it is newsworthy or believable. Of course much of what goes on in the modern political world falls into this category - the press conferences, news leaks, interviews, public relations banquets, et cetera.

To give you an example from close to home, we had our own pseudoevent recently at the Southborough L’Abri. A local reporter came to do a story on this new L’Abri work. After looking around the place and talking for some time she says she wanted to get a picture of some one working in the garden (it was November and the ground had been frozen for

several weeks). The fact that there was no work going on in the garden made no difference, so one of the girls went out to pretend she was pulling up a cabbage and was photographed doing it. Boorstin's analysis would raise the question - was this real? Well, yes and no. What was photographed was a real girl pulling on a real cabbage, and yet the whole event had a staged phoniness about it. Had it not been for the reporter's camera, she would never have been there. A pseudo-event has an ambiguous relationship with reality.

If a statement is a lie, it at least has the possibility of being exposed and therefore discredited as a lie. A pseudo-event is not so clear. If you try to unmask or debunk it, it becomes "news behind the news" and is all the more fascinating and newsworthy. If you know about it, you know how the news was made, and *you* are somehow on the inside. When President Carter appointed Muskie as Secretary of State he openly gave as one of the reasons that he wanted to "improve the image of the administration." Instead of outrage at this (why not, after all, appoint someone on the basis of his qualifications for the job?), there was great interest and speculation. Why does he want to change the image? What did he think the image was in the first place? How will Muskie change it?

A by-product of the growth of pseudo-events has been that the news industry has often become introverted or incestuous, in that the making of the news is more newsworthy and interesting than the news itself. Over a year ago the President was inaugurated, and the Iranian hostages were re-released on the same day. One almost got the impression that more important than both those events was the way in which NBC, ABC and CBS were able to report them simultaneously. A good deal of the coverage, especially when actual news was scanty, was on *how* the press and TV were accomplishing that coverage. This is the press reporting on how the press reports, or the press generating news. This brings the media into the place increasingly where it does not primarily report the news, but it *is* the news. This seems to be true in the case of the most televisable event of all - an assassination. Despite the fact that there is never very much to be said, the television must sustain one's interest for at least twenty-four hours after the event. In this case, how reports were found and/or bungled makes up the news. *Time* writes this after the attempted assassination of Reagan: "As the afternoon progressed, it became evident that television was becoming not just the story's messenger, but part of the story itself." In the same article, *Time* summarizes TV's performance: "often confused, sometimes wrong, but always breathtaking. For one draining afternoon, TV turned America into a giant newsroom."⁷

The growth of pseudo-events can also take a sinister turn. The press has a direct linkage to public opinion. Public opinion, in turn, has obvious effects on political issues. *Time* writes somewhat self-righteously about the extent to which the guerrilla war in El Salvador is a "media event." Both sides, but especially the guerrillas, are not just fighting a battle, but their moves are carefully orchestrated for the benefit of the observing press. Rosenthal from the *New York Times* returned from El Salvador to say that he had never seen a place "where journalism was more part of the process ... " Shirley Christian from the *Miami Herald* said: "People here will be left with the solution partly or wholly created by us - not just the American Government but the American press. Then we will all leave when the story disappears." *Time* writes with a certain indignation that the war should be so influenced by the press's influence. Here, the press blames the politicians and generals for being so susceptible to their own (the press's) power.⁸

One often hears the complaint from almost any trouble spot in the world that there is "too much press, too little information." There is just not enough news to satisfy our expectations for interesting and exciting news. One notices two directions taken by the media in order to generate news: "human interest" stories and preoccupation with gore.

Both take their toll on public consciousness.

The “human interest” story too often involves a voyeurism into the lives of the victims or celebrities. TV cameras went into the home of Billy Gallegos, a hostage in Iran, in order to film his family as they watched his release on their own television. The climax was the point where the announcer observed that tears didn’t come until they saw him the second time. This is a voyeurism into human suffering and emotion in which all involved are cheapened. We who watch it are looking peeping-Tom-like into a private affair, and those whom we watch are having something made public and commercial which ought to remain private.

The demand for reporting of violence has got to be considered a collective neurosis. It is articulated in a poem, “Exclusive Pictures,” by Steve Turner.

Give us good pictures
of the human torch
which show the skin
burnt like chicken,
bursting like grapes.

It will teach us
to avoid flames.

Give us good film
of the lady on the ledge
as she leaps open mouthed
and hits the streets
like a suicide.

It will teach us
to use stairways.

Give us sharp colour
coverage of the African
troubles. Show us
interesting wounds,
craters in fat and flesh.

It will teach us
not to point guns.

Give us five page spreads
of the airliner that fell
like a pigeon to the ground.
And make sure you get there
before the victims are pulled out.

It will teach
engines to function.

Don't give us
any of that shaky
hand-held stuff
where the trapped children
are smoke-like shapes
and their screams barely audible
beneath the wailing sirens,
Get in there with your lenses
and your appetite for danger
and your hard new head
and give us what we're after.
Make us informed.
Make us feel we're really there.
Provide us with education.
Broaden our backgrounds.
We live in a democracy
and we need to know.⁹

When we get this kind of reporting we feel as if we are getting the real thing. Having seen it, we know what horror is like. But ironically, this takes us a step farther away from reality. Having seen it on a TV screen or in a newspaper, we feel as if we understand it, but this is misleading, because we have only seen it at an infinite distance. At any moment we can turn off the TV or put the paper down! The horrifying thing about horror is that it is not a temporary titillation of our imagination - it is impossible to turn it off or put it down; we are caught by it and in it. In the public consciousness this turns real anguish into sentimentality and calloused resignation.

According to Daniel Boorstin's analysis, another result of the growth of the role of the media is that heroes are transformed into celebrities. Heroes have fared poorly under the hand of men such as Marx and Freud, their heroism explained by unconscious ego-centric motivations, but the graphics revolution has done even more to discredit them.

A hero is one who has done something heroic, for which we should respect him. A celebrity, on the other hand, is someone who is well-known for being well-known. The celebrity is not respected, but envied for being famous. The celebrity is a human pseudo-event, whose main virtue is that he or she is reported. Some students of human behaviour have noticed that fame has the value to modern man that salvation did to the man of the Middle Ages. If this is so, then the media is its priesthood. This would explain the almost mystical power of the media, the power to confer celebrity status on a "nobody" in a matter of minutes. (The most reliable way is to shoot a celebrity.) Lewis Lapham, editor of *Harper's*, goes a step further:

Now that God has been pronounced dead, it is conceivable that people would like to transfer His powers and dominions to the media, What else do they have to put in His place? To a large extent the media have had roles of judge and inquisitor thrust upon them because so many other institutions have proved themselves inadequate to the task of omniscience. The media disguise their lack of knowledge with the quality of knowingness, their weakness with the power to forge the metal of celebrity and transmute a political issue into a saleable commodity¹⁰

It is not that there are no more heroes or heroines today. It is that they tend to be changed into celebrities and trivialized in the transition. To illustrate his point, Boorstin gives the

example of Charles Lindbergh. His transatlantic flight was without question an extraordinary heroic achievement. But the media, even then in its relatively more primitive form, could only make just so much of the achievement itself. You could tell and retell the story only a limited number of times. They then began on the human interest stories. How did he feel now that he had become such big news? Did he feel different as a famous man? Had he ever dreamt that such a thing would happen to him? Did his parents ever anticipate that their son would reach such fame? The stories focused on his leap from obscurity to fame in a matter of hours. Lindbergh was outraged at the badgering of the press and at the invasions of his own privacy. He suddenly felt that they had claimed him as public property, so he took considerable pains to avoid them. This, then became the next story: his efforts to stay *out* of the news. His terror of reporters became the most reportable thing of all and sold as many papers as the news of his flight itself. A real hero became a celebrity, the main focus of interest being no longer what he, in fact, had done, but what the press had made out of him, and human greatness existed only at the level of image.

The music group, The Beatles, experienced this same transfiguration.

John Lennon noted with insight that they were just a band who had made it big and the more success they achieved the more unreality they had to face. He saw that what the public wanted was human greatness, but that they were only talented celebrities, unable to fulfil the outsized expectations of their fans. The whole thing became more and more unreal until he, of course, fled.

The Commercial World

The field of advertising is well known for its exploitation, and for this reason I shall be more brief here. However, the specific role that image plays bears mention. Ernest Dichter advised a fellow advertiser on the best technique for selling. He found it is most effective to paint a picture for the customer of the kind of person he would like to be, then convince him that your product is a necessary ingredient of that picture. This advice is fascinating. Notice that there is nothing about persuading the prospective consumer that the product is good, or that it will do the job required. You just create a model of the way he likes to imagine himself or herself, then manage to make the association with the product. For many products it is far more effective to sell by communicating an image that the consumer relates to the product in his or her own imagination, than it is to engage his or her mind with discussions of the practical benefits of the product.

The interesting thing is that about 90% of people polled report that they don't believe what advertisers claim about their products. They feel that many advertisers deliberately misrepresent and cannot be trusted. How can we assess this? Are corporations wasting billions of dollars trying to con a public that is smarter than they think? I doubt it. Through market research they have excellent ways of telling if an advertisement is working or not, and they are working well enough for firms to spend the billions that they do. What, then, is the discrepancy between the facts and figures of the marketing people and the public's profession of "seeing through" advertising? The fact is that the public may well "see through" some advertising and recognize oversized promises, but this has little to do with whether or not they buy the product. The truth or false-hood of any persuasion may be irrelevant to the success of the advertisement. The appeal is rather to your own imagined image of yourself linked to the product, by-passing the question of the virtues of the product. Thus, advertising does not normally lie, it just has an ambiguous relationship to the truth. It is you yourself who contribute the lie as you allow your imagination to act directly on your volition. The advertisement never *claims* in words that you will be like the model if you buy the product. We would laugh at it if it did, and feel very superior. But

when you supply the lie yourself, it is not so easy to detect. We are not dealing with false advertising here, but with images which, because of their power and ambiguity, befuddle the mind. The image keys to something desirable in society (*e.g.* ... freedom or sophistication) and attracts you to it by its bigger-than-life brilliance. This attraction draws you to the product that you are led to associate with it in a completely non-rational way.

Roman and Maas, in their book, *How to Advertise*, write, “Former agency head, Jack Tinker, once estimated that over a billion dollars had been spent advertising each of these six objectives: new, white, cool, power, refreshing, relief.”¹¹ Bear in mind that this was not spent on advertising certain products as much as on communicating these words as Images and making associations with products. The process has nothing to do with persuasion and everything to do with non-rational association.

One of the most familiar images is of the Marlboro Man, and he provides a good case in point. He does not make a promise that Marlboros taste better or cause less cancer or any other such transparent hype. He is just there, usually on a horse in the midst of vast scenery, striking the image in our minds of masculinity, the whole tradition of the American West, and freedom. In fact, if you look closely, you will see that ~n a significant number of the advertisements he is not even smoking a cigarette. I have often wondered if he has perhaps read the Surgeon General’s health warning and given them up. Of course, it is because the advertiser feels that the image itself functions so powerfully and that the association is so clearly there in our minds, that the actual cigarette is superfluous. It is important to notice as well that there is never a promise that if you smoke Marlboros, you, too, will end up as a cowboy in the Rocky Mountains, ever free and confident. We would immediately detect this as false advertising and scornfully despise it. However, the image leaves us nothing to reject rationally, only a picture, laden with cultural meaning and associated with the product. I can only judge its effectiveness by its extraordinary longevity.

An example given by Boorstin is of the experience of Schlitz Beer. Their sales were sagging, so they hired a well-known ad man to help out. He looked over their whole operation and noted that their bottles were steam cleaned before the beer was put into them. He hit on the idea of advertising Schlitz and the ‘pure beer’ because its bottles were steam cleaned. Sales jumped from fifth place to almost first place. There was nothing false about the advertising, but it was a pseudo-event since *all* beers clean their bottles with steam. No promises were made, nor unfair comparisons asserted. An image was conveyed which overshadowed dull reality.

Time writes of the dynamic at work in the world of modelling:

With lots of blusher but no shame, the peacock profession of modelling gives face and body to our covetous dreams, then mocks us as we press our noses against the window glass. What unimaginable delight made the pretty lady swirl and smile as the photographer snapped her picture? What season of debauchery brought the sulky thrust to this beauty’s lower lip? At what grovelling serf does the fine young lord in the Ferrari scowl with such contempt? Nothing; none; at no one; these glossy apparitions are moments that never were - yet they tease us because their reality is beyond question, while our own stored moments, caught in snapshots and thrown into a drawer, are obvious and pallid fakes. Fascination sidesteps good sense, and we wonder; How was this lovely bunkum done?¹²

The fuel that powers images like this is our own extravagant expectations. With the ability of images to convey that these expectations will be met without use of rational persuasion, our own mundane lives, where our expectations are so often shattered, tend to seem dull

and less real.

The Political World

In the world of politics in this time of TV and newspaper coverage, a politician must be able to create and project the right image of himself. Some critics of our political system claim that if one can project the right image, there is nothing else that one need do to be elected. Although this is a bit too cynical, there is an undoubted shift to the tremendous importance of image. In the last presidential election, for example, there was a conscious de-emphasis on issues by strategists on both sides, with the corresponding attention put on image projection.

Boorstin cites Franklin Roosevelt as the first to take full advantage of the media in communicating his image of understanding the sufferings of the people and having the situation in hand. Joe McCarthy, in a completely different style, was a master of pseudo-events in press conferences, news leaks and innuendos. He was able to create the image of a person dangerous to the nation because of communist connections without ever stating dear facts that could be refuted.

In the world of image, truth is beside the point. Take the example of Nixon's press secretary, Ron Zeigler, when he referred to one of his own earlier statements about the Watergate break-in as "inoperative." Some suggested that this was just a face-saving euphemism for a lie. Others, however, looking a bit more deeply into political communication, say that he meant exactly what he said. He meant that the statement would no longer function as an effective image. It could no longer be passed off as believable. The truth or falsity of the statement was beside the point.

Many of the aspects of image orientation in the political world emerge in a party convention, which is at least half pseudo-event. I will quote a newspaper's evaluation of a pre-convention extravaganza. This was before the Republican convention, but it could well have been either party.

Like all commercials, the convention is not a reasoned argument, an assessment of strengths and weaknesses. It's an emotional appeal, an attempt to group unrelated themes and feelings, an attempt to mingle the many meanings of good

It appealed to that nonideological muddle in our subconscious, that sea of dreams and memories that somehow connects stalks of wheat and Thomas Edison and Lindbergh's flight and oil derricks and snow-capped mountains and stiffly posed old photographs in a "past" most of us have never known except as imagery or schoolboy metaphor.¹³

Here we see all the elements of image-making which are more at home in the advertising world. Content is avoided, reasoned argument is bypassed. The imagination is to carry us past the need to think critically. It is to gather together our emotions and drive us to action.

Another side of political events of this sort is the sheer importance of the role of the media itself. This influence is not always sought for, but may come more as a result of the media's own image of omniscience. Here is an example of the same convention:

Television, with incessant demands upon it to provide instant information and analysis, displays reporting in its rawest form. During conventions, viewers are required to do their own sifting and editing ... The network anchormen themselves seemed unhappy over the situation. David Brinkley, on NBC grouched about television having become "something of an intercom" over which rumors and other

raw information “fly back and forth.”

One of the more telling moments came after midnight when a haggard-looking Mr. Bush, in a polo shirt, told television reporters how “surprised” he was at his selection. Why was he surprised? a reporter asked. His name had been on everyone’s list of possibilities for weeks. Mr. Bush then showed that he, too, had determined his reality from TV. “You people were circulating a lot of rumours out there,” he said, “and maybe they were based on a lot of fact.”¹⁴

One has the idea as one watches a convention that, despite the inane blowing of horns and waving of hats and banners that take place on the convention floor, there are some men in a smoke-filled room somewhere nearby who know what is going on and who are pulling the strings. There may be a lot of dirty pool, but at least someone knows what is happening amidst the chaos. What this article implies, however, is that although there are men in the back room, they are watching television to *find out* what is happening on the convention floor, and *nobody* is in control! The media do not welcome this role. In fact they are usually irate when they discover it, but it is a problem partly of their own making, as they have built their industry by feeding people’s insatiable expectations for instant news.

Jacques Ellul, in his book *Propaganda*, raises many of these same issues, but, lest we think that as educated people we are free from such rank mindlessness, he points out that educated people can be the most susceptible to it. There are three reasons given. First, it is the educated person who absorbs the greatest amount of second hand and unverifiable information. Second, it is the educated person who feels the need to have an opinion on every important question of his time. Third, it is the educated person who considers himself capable of reaching a judgment for himself on the basis of his accumulated wisdom. When all is said and done, he needs propaganda more than anyone. Of course he is not arguing against education, but merely saying that coming with education there can be a certain naiveté and overestimation of one’s grasp on the world.

In bringing this part of our discussion to a close, I will quote Boorstin again at length:

Until recently we have been justified in believing Abraham Lincoln’s familiar maxim: “You may fool all the people some of the time; you can even fool some of the people all the time; but you cannot fool all the people all the time.” This has been the foundation-belief of American democracy. Lincoln’s appealing slogan rests on two elementary assumptions. First, that there is a clear and visible distinction between sham and reality, between the lies a demagogue would have us believe and the truths which are there all the time. Second, that the people tend to prefer reality to sham, that if offered a choice between a simple truth and a contrived image, they will prefer the truth.

Neither of these any longer fits the facts. Not because people are less intelligent or more dishonest. Rather because great unforeseen changes - the great forward strides of American civilization - have blurred the edges of reality. The pseudo-events which flood our consciousness are neither true nor false in the old familiar senses. The very same advances which have made them possible have also made the images - however planned, contrived, or distorted - more vivid, more attractive, more impressive, and more persuasive than reality itself.¹⁵

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- ¹ Daniel Boorstin, *The Image* (New York: Atheneum, 1961).
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