

THE PUBLIC PERSPECTIVE

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PLUMBING THE PUBLIC MIND

By J. Ronald Milavsky

Bill Moyers is one of a very few American journalists who still manage to produce and air a steady stream of news documentaries. His latest effort is *The Public Mind: Image and Reality in America*. It consists of four one-hour programs, which aired on most public television stations in November. Part I, "Consuming Images," deals with how the images produced by the television-advertising industry complex are affecting us. Part II, "Leading Questions," explores how studies done by the polling and market research industry are used. Part III, "Illusions of News," examines recent trends affecting the performance and mission of the electronic and print press. Part IV, "The Truth About Lies," investigates the social and economic consequences of prevarication.

We have come to expect certain things from Bill Moyers' productions and we find most of them here: exposure to big ideas and insights into things that strongly affect us; interviews with interesting people who have these ideas; intelligent use of stock news film, the staple of low-cost productions, to illustrate the story; and film editing and camera use that keep things moving but not at the frenetic pace so common in commercial news products. We also see Moyers' other trademarks: an undercurrent of preaching; a romantic yearning for "the good old days"; and seething, controlled indignation over current practices and policies.

But how does the latest effort rate as an exposition of the public mind? By this standard, it is somewhat uneven. One finds in the series some already known but perhaps not yet widely disseminated empirical findings, mixed with false assertions about trends. Theories that are valid are intermingled with those that are not. Most important, in four hours of television about the public mind, there is no reference to data about the state of that mind which might support or refute the asser-

tions made about how it is influenced.

Part I, "Consuming Images," presents "critical" communications theorists (Neil Postman, Stuart Ewen, Todd Gitlin) to argue that we are being deluged with images that (1) have no truth of their own, "they just are;" and (2) that cause our logical and critical abilities to atrophy, (3) making us pushovers for those who want to manipulate us, (4) which are commercial interests who are using the images to sell their products; and (5) all this reaches to the world of politics, where images are also being used to sell us our political leaders. Data supporting these assertions would have been welcome, but none were offered. We are apparently expected to believe them without any question.

There is nothing new in this "big business

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controlling the little guy" scenario. The argument is drawn from the "powerful effects" and critical Marxist traditions of communications studies, and dates at least from the 1930s. The "powerful effects" tradition makes assumptions about the nature of man that are generally unsupportable: that he is isolated, alienated from his fellows whom he distrusts, and has a childlike mind. All of these characteristics leave him easily manipulable by the media, which are controlled by the ruling class. This tradition was shown to be flawed by the earliest communications researchers who found man to be socially integrated, quite intelligent, and capable of defense against the onslaught, however inveterate the persuaders. In fact, the argument presented in Part I is directly contradicted by a section in Part II, in which *New York Times* reporter R. W. Apple describes focus group research which convinces him that people have a very firm grip on reality, and that they pay more attention to the issues than many politicians seem to believe.

Part II, "Leading Questions," takes on

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the polling and market research industries. It argues that such research aims at discovering people's emotional responses for purposes of exploitation. From these data the "hidden persuaders" construct messages that, when "brilliantly executed," induce us to buy products without our ever realizing we have been manipulated. Again, it's the vulnerable individual thesis, elaborated to point out that the most vulnerable thing about the vulnerable people is that they have emotions—which undermine rationality.

Once again, there is the bridge from market research to sell products, to the world of politics. On-camera statements by Richard Wirthlin talking about research he conducted for President Reagan seem to support the piece's contention that you can sell presidents much as you sell soap. Wirthlin underscores the importance of studying the electorate's values, with a mind toward creating campaign messages that try to fit Reagan's image to these values. The viewer can't tell whether Wirthlin's comments were extracted fairly from the longer interview Moyers had with him.

But this aside, research such as there is (and there isn't enough) on the impact of political commercials in campaigns seems to indicate minimal effects—certainly much smaller than could have made any difference in the campaigns discussed, which were won by landslide proportions.

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Part II also argues that this sort of research is responsible for the trend in campaigns toward more reliance on images than realities, and especially on the symbols of family and flag. Such an argument almost leaves the candidates and their campaign staffs without responsibility for this trend. The fact is that there are many reasons why candidates avoid taking stands on issues in a mass democratic society consisting of many powerful interest groups. What is possibly the major fall-out from campaigns that rely more on images than on substance is the turned-off voter, whose intelligence is insulted increasingly. He is not manipulated—but put to sleep. This gets only brief mention, however, at the end of the program.

Part III, "Illusions of News," turns attention to the role of the electronic and print press in political campaigns. We hear a number of arguments, some familiar, some new — for example, that the press pays too much attention to staged campaign events and not enough to the issues, and that news reporting is going the way of political commercials, emphasizing images. (As to the latter, comparative content analysis of political commercials and network news programs show that commercials actually devote more time to issues than do the news programs.) The program also faults television news for compressing complex matters into short sound bites. News reporters are seen as having become celebrities whose personalities and demographic appeal are studied by campaign managers — so that the latter can choose the right one to be granted an interview. When a person with a warm-feeling image was needed to interview Vice President Bush, Tom Brokaw was selected; when Mr Bush needed a fight, the abrasive Dan Rather was chosen. It is also argued that the networks often seem more inter-

ested in the interviews to promote a news program than to generate news. Finally, these and other trends are traced to corporate takeovers and the consequent quest for higher and higher profits, and to greater competition from entertainment fare.

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Print journalism does not escape criticism. Newspapers, too, have experienced concentration due to mergers and acquisitions, and their corporate bosses, too, are demanding high profits. So, in Moyers' view, they sacrifice *important* stories for *pleasing* stories. These assertions are actually contradicted within the piece by Ben Taylor, executive editor, and Tom Mulvey, managing editor of *The Boston Globe*, who argue that they try to attract audience by adding features, and that they do not subtract news. But their claims are not allowed to divert attention from the big-business-will-do-anything-for-a-profit theme.

In my judgment, this hour was at once the most seriously critical and the most uneven: telling on some important points, way off the mark on others. The free, privately owned press is the only private business given guaranteed freedom by the US Constitution — as Bill Kovach, former editor of *The Atlanta Constitution* points out. The bargain is, of course, that it owes something important in return. If the press is indeed evolving in the ways mentioned, it will be less and less deserving of that special guarantee. But is it evolving in this fashion? We need better data. Still, I know of nothing that supports the contention that the news hole is getting smaller.

Studies show that newspapers have been moving away from national and international news and building up their local news content. There are at least two reasons for this. One is that local television stations started doing more national and international news as satellite newsgathering made such coverage inexpensively available — they can buy it from syndicated news services. Second, most newspapers are, in fact, local, not national, media. They need to have more local coverage to compete better with local television news, which the public has been turning to more and more.

The argument that corporate desire for profits drives out hard news makes little sense

anyway. Whatever its appeal as an audience attractor, on the cost side hard news turns out to be the cheapest kind of news there is. That is part of the secret of the Cable News Network's great success. CNN was able to survive by not doing the very expensive packaged features that the other networks still offer (though less often than they used to because even they find these features too expensive). The newspapers have the wire services to keep them well-supplied with cheap national and international news. The local news that they are turning to more and more is what is expensive to gather. To report it, they must add staff.

In sum, Part III should be given credit for pointing out the increased reliance in campaigns on images in place of substance, the way campaigns exploit the news anchors, and the use of news reporting as program promotion. But the arguments pointing to pressures for greater profit by corporate owners as the driving force are off the mark, and I simply don't see a shift away from "hard news" reporting.

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Part IV, "The Truth About Lies," examines why lies are both abhorrent to the public mind and at the same time, exceedingly well tolerated by it. This hour draws on infamous past news events in which lying played a significant role, and uses fresh interviews with principals to add details and explanations. The program explains lying as a phenomenon that is psychological (to avoid punishment) and social psychological (to avoid being thrown out of a group or to protect the integrity of the group). These sources are seen to be the same for individuals as for organizations alike. Now, if that seems too simple to you, it's because it probably is.

The famous incidents covered were the Bay of Pigs fiasco, the Challenger disaster, Watergate, the Vietnam War, and Iran-Contra. We learn once more that President Kennedy planned the Bay of Pigs for many months with advisors who individually had information which undermined many of the assumptions on which the invasion plan was based. None of the planning group called attention to that

knowledge. Had the information been brought up, presumably, the project would have stopped — but this means the group would have been disbanded. No one wanted to say, "the emperor has no clothes," lest the group be dissolved.

In the discussion of Watergate, we find that the Nixon White House considered itself at war with the Congress, and that John Dean ratted on the rest because they were going to force him to lie. He was extremely afraid of the consequences of lying in case he was found out. (So avoidance of punishment forces both the telling of truth and the telling of lies?) Dean was ostracized for telling the truth.

In the discussion of Lyndon Johnson and the Vietnam War, we learn that Johnson at first believed his advisors from the Kennedy administration who said the war could easily be won. When he realized it couldn't be, he deliberately tried to deceive everyone else in order to keep attention focused on his Great Society social program. His staff, presumably including Bill Moyers, urged him to tell the truth as the only possible way to maintain public support. But he refused and began to believe his own lie. The same staff went along. This is a new wrinkle, with the group members urging truth while supporting the lie. Simple theories may not explain everything.

Finally, we are told that patriotic Ollie North lied to Congress to protect the Contras from destruction, which would have followed the loss of aid -- a heroic lie if indeed the Contras were in danger of destruction. This, too, seems a little beyond the scope of the theory to explain.

Starting with the Answers

There are two distinct approaches in producing a piece of long form (more than five minutes) television journalism. One is to send out a producer, a reporter and a camera person to gather facts and tape. Then a story is put together based on what facts and tape were gathered. Sometimes it turns out to be not much of a story. A second, much safer way of operating, is to know what story you want to tell before you send the crew out. Then they can be directed precisely to the facts and videotape needed.

The Public Mind seems to have used the second approach. It started with the themes that commercialism is doing harm to the public mind and to political and journalistic institutions, and that powerful organizations will do almost any-

thing to protect their interests. In short, big guys exploiting the little guys, and going to immoral lengths to preserve their positions. The words and tape were used to elaborate these themes, which populist America has always loved in news and in drama. For all the decrying of exploitation of emotions by manipulative ad men, Bill Moyers seems to have done a fair share of it in these programs. They made me angry. Until I started to think about what I had seen. Which, as a vulnerable, emotional being, I'm not supposed to do.

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