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ABSTRACT

One of 52 theoretical papers on school crime and its relation to poverty, this chapter discusses the role of mass media in school crime. Media culture--the knowledge, techniques, and assumptions used by people who construct media messages--is shown to contribute to public definitions of and beliefs about the nature of "youth." It is suggested that young people also learn appropriate ways of being "youthful" from mass media, and that these activities may be at odds with the perspective of parents, school officials, and other adults. Gaps in existing knowledge about the relevance of mass media messages to youth culture are noted, along with promising research topics. (Author)

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THE MASS MEDIA AND SCHOOL CRIME\*

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## ABSTRACT

The role of the mass media in school crime is discussed. Media culture -- the knowledge, techniques, and assumptions used by people who construct media messages -- is shown to contribute to public definitions of and beliefs about the nature of "youth." It is suggested that young people also learn appropriate ways of being "youthful" from mass media, and that these activities may be at odds with the perspective of parents, school officials, and other adults. Gaps in existing knowledge about the relevance of mass media messages to youth culture are noted, along with promising research topics.

## Introduction

Two important facts of social life are the millions of children in elementary and secondary schools and the size and power of the mass media. We should be surprised if there were no relationship between the two, although we may be confused by the complexities attending any effort to sort out the nature of their interaction. But we should try systematically to investigate all facets of their interplay, and we should be cautious about dismissing any relevant phenomena. This essay states the case for further research into the effects of the mass media on all aspects of youth culture, including school crime. My general thesis is that school-related crime is but one feature of youth culture, which, in turn, is partially shaped and publicly defined by what I will call media culture -- the assumptions, techniques, and knowledge involved in the production and presentation of mass media messages. The remainder of this essay will clarify the concepts of media culture and youth culture and will conclude with suggestions for research essential to delineate the relevance of the mass media to school crime.

## Media Culture

The mass media pervade our lives. Newspapers, radio, television, records, movies, and magazines receive a lot of attention from people of all ages in our society. Few students of culture would deny the importance of mass media as sources of entertainment, information, and personal involvement, including so-called parasocial interaction (in which an audience member will talk with or respond in other ways to a media personality). This is especially true of television, the most widely used mass medium. The TV set has become a standard fixture in most homes. According to a report published by the A.C. Nielsen Company in 1976, nearly 99 percent of all American homes have at least one television set and nearly 50 percent have two or more. And watching television has become a household activity often more prevalent than family conversation: surveys (Roper, 1971) indicate that many television sets are turned on more than six hours a day. This amount of television exposure for young people, combined with the countless hours listening to radio programming and records, leads one to inquire about the content of each medium, and wonder about its effects.

Interest in the nature of mass media programming content has led some researchers to posit the existence of a media culture, or the knowledge, techniques, and assumptions involved in media programming. According to Philip Elliott (1972), mass media content reflects the actions of communicators that

result in the creation of an image of social reality which includes both cognitive and evaluative elements. The cognitive elements are drawn from a limited range of sources in society, processed through occupational and technological routines and presented to add to a separate and self-supporting media culture. It acquires an evaluative dimension through the elaboration of symbols and definitions within it, identifying particular social groups and their positions on particular social issues. (p. 145)

Stated differently, media "reality" is packaged for a variety of practical purposes, and is evaluated by the media industry with its own criteria. We shall see how this media culture directly promotes media messages to buy and watch (or read or listen) and indirectly promotes a youth subculture, on the one hand, while giving unrealistic images of young people as devious, wayward, etc., to school officials and other adults, on the other hand.

## Media Effects

The subject of media effects is very complex. No effort will be made here to cite all the research on mass media as a causal factor in violence and other crime (cf. Comstock, Rubinstein, & Murray, 1972; Howitt & Cumberbatch, 1975). While the findings on the direct impact of various media are inconclusive, several studies do indicate an indirect contribution of media messages to viewer images and definitions of social situations. Noble (1975) found few consistent and strong relationships between media involvement and juvenile delinquency, although his data did suggest that the impact of programming was mediated by one's prior experience. He found that viewers may either identify with and/or recognize certain characters. The former type of involvement has the greater effect on immediate action beyond the viewing setting (especially in the case of movies), although both types can contribute to images of reality. In his discussion of recognition, Noble (1975) compares the role of mass media personalities to that formerly occupied by the extended family:

These characters serve as something akin to a screen community with whom the viewer regularly talks and interacts. Viewers who feel they know

these characters well may indeed compare new people they meet in real life with such characters in order to predict how these new people are likely later to behave. I suggest that this regularly appearing screen community serves for many as an extended kin grouping whereby the viewer comes into contact with the wider society beyond his immediate family. (p. 64)

To this extent, the media images inform young people, but they are also interpreted within an autobiographical context (cf. Halloran, Brown, & Chaney, 1970). Noble (1975) summarizes:

The influence of the media on deviancy is therefore complex and not without its redeeming features, but nevertheless television may aggravate deviancy by defining the affluent life style enjoyed by television heroes as normal for real life.... It is in this respect...that the media are more potent, since they seem to define "life-style" which denotes membership of the larger society which television makes visible.... The encouragement of unrealistic consumption patterns as normal, whether by advertising or by programmes indirectly selling a way of life, would seem to be the most disturbing aspect of the relationship between the media and deviant behavior. (p. 175)

It should be emphasized that the relationship between



media imagery and interpretations has also been found to vary by class and racial background (Greenberg & Gordon, 1972).

Studying the effects of the mass media through questionnaires and laboratory experiments can provide useful information about the impact of such messages on youthful behavior, but we must also draw on methods and perspectives that will help clarify how young people use and interpret media messages in their day-to-day lives. As more social scientists have realized the inadequacy of explanatory models based on categorical distinctions between "independent" and "dependent" variables (cf. Johnson, 1975; Douglas, 1976), increasing attention has been turned to examining the contribution of mass media messages to people's beliefs about their everyday lives (cf. Snow, 1974). Now the emphasis is on cumulative effects of seeing repeated situations, problems, styles, etc., on the way people interpret and define real situations. In seeking to clarify the relationships between the mass media and school crime, then, it is important to delve into the origin, impact, and future of cultural definitions of youth, authority, deviance, crime, and the like. As George Gerbner (1973) notes:

The most distinctive characteristics of large groups of people are acquired

in the process of growing up, learning, and living in one culture rather than in another. Individuals make their own selection of materials through which to cultivate personal images, tastes, views, and preferences, and they seek to influence those available to and chosen by their children. But they cannot cultivate that which is not available. They will rarely select what is scarcely available, seldom emphasized, or infrequently presented. A culture cultivates not only patterns of conformity but also patterns of alienation or rebellion after its own images. (p. 567)

This approach to clarifying school crime as a feature of youth culture in general and media-inspired activity in particular leads to what Gerbner has termed "cultivation analysis," the process that

begins with the insights of the study of institutions and message systems they produce, and goes on to investigate the contributions that these systems and their symbolic functions make to the cultivation of assumptions about life and the world.... Institutional process and message system analyses generate the framework of terms and functions for cultivation analysis.... The dynamics of continuities, rather than only of change, need to be considered in their symbolic functions. Such examination is necessarily longitudinal and comparative in its analysis of the processes and consequences of institutionalized public acculturation. (pp. 567-569)

This interactional model is at odds with those which see people as determined, or preprogrammed, by one situation or another. (cf. Douglas & Johnson, 1977). Rather, individual conduct is perceived as a process in which people interpret the situation they are in, seek opportunity for meaningful involvement, and align their activities to those of others. From this perspective, the culture offers alternatives, and one important resource to draw on in specific instances is the group of images obtained from mass media messages. Thus, social life is both free and constrained. As Stokes and Hewitt (1976), put it:

Those portions of normative culture that are relevant to the person's intentions or situation are a part of awareness and constitute one of several conditions within which conduct is formed.  
(p. 847)

Gerbner and Gross (1976) have provided one of the better studies of how the mass media mold people's awareness of social facts and situations. These researchers sought to clarify the impact of heavy viewing (more than four hours a day) on respondents' awareness of and beliefs about social problems,

occupational distribution in the United States, and other images of reality implicitly presented in standard television programming. In general, they found that heavy viewers were consistently more likely to overestimate the number of police officers in our society and overestimate the threat of crime-related danger to individuals. Heavy viewers were less trustworthy of others and far more fearful. Most important for the present essay is their finding that respondents under 30 years of age -- the first television generation -- are more likely to accept media definitions of reality.

Both this study of media effects and several studies of the actual production work of television newscasts (Elliot, 1972; Epstein, 1973; Altheide, 1976) suggest that the messages of media culture may be taken seriously by viewers. It is not only the entertainment messages and cop shows that influence how people see themselves and others; newscasts also shape people's perceptions of issues and problems (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). One implication is that the media culture may influence the cultural stock of knowledge. If so, then we must examine our knowledge of and beliefs about youth, crime, and deviancy in order to (1) clarify the origin of our ideas on such topics, especially the role of the mass media in our acquisition of "knowledge" about each; (2) attempt

to evaluate such information, and (3) consider alternative basic assumptions.

We will first examine the basic assumptions about youth, note their origin, and be particularly attentive to the role of the mass media in shaping them. This will be followed by a discussion of the symbolic ties of "youth" to various aspects of school crime.

### Youth Culture

Various reports have described the youth culture (cf. Coleman, 1963; Friedenberg, 1965; Douglas, 1970; Scott & Lyman, 1970; Berger, 1971; Sebald, 1976). My purposes are somewhat different: rather than listing all the values, beliefs, etc., which characterize "youth," I will deal with the notion of youth culture as presented by the mass media and note how it is sustained by adults who are former youth. My aim, then, is not to argue that there is really a youth culture, but to suggest why we believe that youth is a natural stage of life, and to note how the mass media have contributed to the image of youth and the cultural belief in it.

The most distinctive trait of youth culture is that its membership is marked off by age-related statuses

and activities. The terms youth, adolescents, and teenagers are used interchangeably, although the more inclusive term youth is used in some cases to extend to around the age of 30. One reason for this change is that youth is a status associated with school and other "preparatory" activities for adult life. Since more people are attending colleges and universities, more people are "young." As Berger (1971) notes in his provocative essay, "How Long is a Generation?":

The age at which one enters adolescence appears in general to be getting lower, whereas the age at which one becomes a 'mature' adult appears in general to be getting higher; the period of adolescence is thus expanded....This extension of 'youthfulness' is rife in American culture. Youth groups today usually include members in their middle and late thirties....What I am suggesting is that the extension of cultural definitions of 'youth' to a period covering at least twenty years and sometimes longer, extends the period in which 'youthful' (i.e., irresponsible) behavior is positively sanctioned. (p. 23)

A useful way to look at the situation of young people and grasp the impact of the mass media on their lives is to see them as "strangers, who [try] to be permanently accepted or, at least tolerated by the group" (Schutz,

1964, p.91). More specifically, youth are not treated as bona fide members of society, but as potential members who will be rewarded with membership with the passage of time, and will become respected members by keeping a clean record, that is, one free of faults and failures in the eyes of adults, the true natives. But youth are a special kind of strangers. They did not voluntarily visit the adult world; it was foisted upon them. And they did not ask to be treated as marginal people, or perhaps more correctly, as prospective people. But it happened. Their identity is not of their own choosing, at least not from the adult perspective, yet they are expected to assume an identity compatible with future roles they now know nothing about (cf. Bensman & Vidich, 1971).

The successful passage into respected statuses requires that prevailing definitions of youth be accepted. The institutions which are charged with protecting the social order from those who are believed to be immature and inept do their work by instilling into these "strangers" the expectation that only time, work, and ritual will be rewarding (cf. Cicourel & Kitsuse, 1963). As Berger (1971) emphasizes:

There are good reasons to believe that in the by now proverbial 'search for identity,' inducing the process of search is sociologically more important than anything one may happen to find along the way. While young persons are discovering that it is important to 'find themselves,' what they are actually learning is that they are immature until they do.

Of course, individuals learn quickly who is in control and become skilled at presenting artfully constructed selves in order to be permitted uninterrupted passage to adulthood. As Scott and Lyman (1970) note:

Individuals in modern mass industrial societies are likely to experience life as if it had some of the properties of a theatrical drama.  
(p. 22)

Self-presentation, including dress, speech, and interactional style count for a lot in being accepted, but the specific content of speech, dress, and style are obtained from the social environment.

#### The Mass Media and Youth Culture

Youth culture is both a product and a target of the mass media. The interaction of media culture, media message, and impact on the social meanings of youth is



not as yet clear, but informed speculation is possible and necessary if these complex relationships are to be further investigated.

The mass media did not invent the notion of youth as an objectively distinct period of anyone's life, but it has specified and popularized some aspects of it. As Peterson and Berger (1972) note about rock music:

But rock changed the audience as well by gradually creating a self-conscious teen generation. Remember that before 1955 there was no music which spoke clearly to the interests and needs of teen-agers. Rock changed that. It defined the correct behavior of a "teen queen," outlined the "fast stud," and "bad-good" male ideal, reveled in the joy and agonies of puppy love, noted the irrelevance of school routines as compared with the reality of fast cars, surfing, and the exhilaration of dancing. Through-out rock lyrics there were pointed contrasts between the teen way of life and the behavioral norms imposed by adults. (p. 296).

Most important, the images and styles needed by youth and promoted by media culture are necessarily different from, if not at odds with, adult life. Youth activities and responsibilities are different from those of respectable adults, but the media messages promote an identity which also serves as an explanation of these

differences.

The development of youth as an idea was a by-product of media culture and the discovery that young people could consume. The commercialism of the mass media encouraged the development of new markets. Around 1950, young people were targeted for youthful impressions and imagery that would strike a responsive chord. This was spawned by the style of newly recognized Black musicians, such as B.B. King, Little Richard, and Joe Turner (cf. Gillett, 1972). Ironically, the life situations of ghetto culture were made respectable for middle-class youth by emphasizing emotions, absurdity, and futility. While such themes were undoubtedly good descriptions of the day-to-day consciousness and problems of millions of Black Americans, they unwittingly came to promote similar definitions among majority youth. Thus, American youth gradually came to take for granted many of the images presented as part of their own identity, and see themselves as a distinct group with their own problems and solutions. Equally important is the role of the mass media in maintaining similar adult definitions. The availability of new sounds for a new market not only revitalized the record industry, but, more important, added a new dimension to radio programming that would

eventually lead to many stations "narrowcasting" for a specific audience rather than broadcasting in order to reach all listeners. An important audience was the "youthful" listener. As Peterson and Berger (1972) put it:

Rather than a few networks each changing the style of program over the course of the day to fit the interest of those family members most likely to be listening, the ten to 25 stations in a market now program music, information, and advertisements for one particular sort of listener, teen, black, country fan, housewife, etc., throughout the day. (p. 294)

As the youth market became more established as an entity in its own right, movies were made which emphasized the newly defined, youthful pursuits involving hedonism, alienation and despair, and the need to search for a meaningful identity and refuse to accept arbitrary roles. The classic example is Rebel Without a Cause, starring James Dean. Similar themes would be repeated many times by other actors in other movies (e.g., Elvis Presley in Jailhouse Rock). And in later years the dress and identity of the characters would change, but the conflict of generations would be continued. Easy Rider, starring

Peter Fonda and Dennis Hopper, is an example.

These movies and many others were significant because they reinforced common notions about youth while providing an example of what alienation and injustice looked like. Of course, in the later pictures (e.g., Easy Rider) the forms of deviance change. This is done in order to fit in with the context of the times and be relevant to all people curious about youth. Indeed, one of the outstanding and subtle points about such presentations is that one leaves the theatre with an impression that somehow the message is really about "society," not just a good film.

Popular music and movies were formidable definers and teachers of youthful life in their own right, but they became even more effective when combined. One of the strokes of genius among media personnel was the realization that songs could form the basis for creating an entire film, and that the audience would transfer the empathy, meanings, and emotion from one to the other. The earliest, and perhaps most notable, success of this kind of film was Blackboard Jungle, released in 1956 and introduced by the then-popular song, "Rock Around the Clock." More recently this has been done with the Beatles' songs in the movie Yellow Submarine.

Earlier comments about the perspective of cultivation analysis would suggest that some of the examples of popular culture just noted have influenced how youth conceive of themselves and how others see them. I think this is the case, and suggest that radios, records, and popular music appear to provide the most influential mass mediated imagery for affirming the character of youth.

There are three reasons for this: (1) The images, themes, and lyrics, along with the distinctive beat(s), are defined and understood by all listeners in society to be youthful, the "kids" music." For one thing, the trauma of the search for identity is emphasized, as are notions about alienation and hypocrisy (cf. Denisoff, 1972). And for another, the distinct packaging of the records and the common understanding that some radio stations are "rockers" symbolically make them out of bounds for anyone uncommitted to the nuances of living a young life. Adults honor the sounds of rock as a territorial boundary, and if they disapprove of a youthful endeavor will often challenge the legitimacy of the selection and amplification of music. As the fundamentalist parent of one youth often remarked, "Turn off that damned satanic music!" Young people are also

pressured to hear youthful sounds, and to tune in an improper station or buy an illegitimate record in the presence of friends invites ridicule. (2) The second reason radios and records are important to youth is that they are part of most youthful activities. This is especially true of involvements in the "car culture." (3) Finally, popular music, and the radios or records that deliver it, define the taken-for-granted meanings of group membership among the young. Anyone engaging in anticipatory socialization from, say, grammar school to junior high school knows that music is important, and that acquiring knowledge of certain artists, dances, and the like is a way of convincing oneself and one's friends that one has changed.

Television also plays an important role in youth identity and as a source of information for potential ways of acting in various situations. At the extreme, television can give ideas or teach routines for a particular act, including a murder, firebombing, or theft (Davison, 1974). However, such cases are likely to be rare since such imitation will only occur if an individual is already predisposed to a certain act, and is consciously looking for a way to accomplish it.

Detailed studies of television content in regard to

images, themes, etc., have already been done (cf. Comstock et al., 1972; Gerbner, Gross, & Melody, 1973). Many of these materials can be used for answering some of the other questions that follow.

Further studies must be undertaken to document how television programmers conceive of the youth situation and how it is presented. For example, is youth perceived as a time that is necessarily traumatic, fun-loving, or what? Also, is the appropriate scenario for youthful activities large urban centers, ghettos, or the suburbs? Answering such questions opens the door for investigating how certain styles, argots, and group involvements (such as gang activities) may flow across the society. Good case studies of such phenomena are desperately needed to understand how the process of constructing an image of youth is actually accomplished. This is crucial because people who work in media programming often use sources of information derived from other mass media (cf. Elliott, 1972; Altheide, 1976). This "media incest" tends to promote certain images that have already been presented, and thus make them seem "really true," when in fact they may be only true of one segment of youth in one part of the country. A good example of such media myopia occurred in the late 1960s when CBS produced a documentary

of life in a "conservative, middle-class" community in the Midwest entitled "Sixteen in Webster Groves." The newsmen were surprised that these youth differed from the young people they were familiar with, and wondered why. Indeed, the CBS crew had such difficulty grasping the state of mind these young people typified that their documentary tended to distort what really occurred. The resulting reaction from people all across the country prompted a documentary of the aftermath of the report entitled "Webster Groves Revisited." The important point for the present discussion is that these media people had relied on media materials instead of firsthand involvement with young people throughout the society. Thus, they were surprised that Webster Groves was different.

We also need to know what role television plays in the day-to-day lives of young people -- especially how youth is presented and how young viewers may interpret programming (cf. Blumler & Katz, 1974). This can best be determined through experimental study designs that have been validated through direct field experience. Such studies are now practically nonexistent, although one report about the effect of the media on adult criminals is noteworthy. According to this account



(Ward, 1977) undercover agents convinced a group of people involved in the illegal sale of weapons that they were actually mafioso who wanted to make a large purchase. The agents used images derived from the movie The Godfather and such television programs as "Baretta" and "Kojak" in presenting themselves. According to one participant, the scenes worked because "they were already in the [brains of] the criminals," who had seen the same media presentations. There is no reason why perceptive teachers at all levels of the school system could not do studies in order to document how their youthful charges incorporate media imagery into their lives.

Social scientists know little about how television may be seen as a political tool by youth groups. The effect of, say, being interviewed by a local station or a network should not be overlooked. This is particularly important if, as occurred on a recent NBC documentary on violence, gang members are permitted to boast of their crimes on the air. Do such youth even care about publicity, and are others likely to do whatever is necessary to obtain national recognition? We simply do not know this.

Finally, we need to investigate how television and

other media presentations depict youth to adults. This is particularly true given the magnitude of crime and violence programming that involves youth. Do parents, police, school officials, and other adults see their youthful charges as similar to or different from the characters presented on television? And what about newspaper reports and television newscasts? Are some spectacular crimes regarded as typical, and do they in any way influence how police officials and perhaps legislators see the "delinquency problem"? (cf. Altheide, 1976). Studies of how individual cases are treated in the mass media, understood by the reading/viewing public, and defined by other young people are essential (cf. Altheide & Gilmore, 1972). The available studies indicate that media reports about "crime," "delinquency," and the like can become self-fulfilling prophecies as community awareness and police activity intensify and amplify the situation (Cohen & Young, 1973). This is the general process by which "crime waves" are constructed.

Focusing on the process by which one or two individual cases come to be regarded as "typical" also directs research attention to teachers and other officials likely to have an important role in defining a given situation as a "screw up," "accident," "incident," "prank," or

"crime." What assumptions do teachers make about social life in general, and how their students fit into it in particular instances? Do they, for example, approach today's youth through their past youth? I think this is very important in light of the changing forms of youth culture and attendant sources of rule violation. Drugs are one example. With the exception of some younger teachers who may share some of the values of their students, many teachers seem to have a difficult time understanding drug use among junior high and high school students. In their day, they drank, and that was about all; they never took drugs. The differences between adult and youth definitions of normal deviance are crucial.

Finally, while the uncertainty and search for meaning presumed to characterize the youth experience are promoted by the mass media, the mass media also maintain the reality of this image even after people pass into adulthood. The mass media may prevent adults from seeing much of their juvenile anguish and related arbitrary lifestyle by providing nostalgia, pleasant but very unrealistic reconstructions of their early years. This enables adults to maintain a belief in the more pleasant side of their "immature years," while generally

acknowledging how "silly we were." The now-popular program "Happy Days" is a prime example of the purpose of television programming, its relevance to media culture, and the unrealistic way the "happy fifties" are presented. The hero of the program "The Fonz" is a stylish deviant who hobnobs with the decent but "hairbrained" children of the more affluent middle class. Fonz is accepted by the families of his respectable peers, and is generally regarded as "really a good boy" who has some occasional problems. Not only is this a highly unrealistic picture of the kind of person represented by the Fonz--"greasers," "hoods," "thugs," "bums," and other terms were used during that time--but it overlooks the basic fact that respectable people did not want their sons and daughters even associating with his kind, and would almost never sanction his presence in their homes.

Another effect of nostalgia programming could be to support adult beliefs that they were fundamentally different from the new generation, say, in regard to "fun," "getting into trouble," and an array of deviant activities (e.g., "booze" and not "dope"). What is usually missing is a complete recollection of the total context of meaning in which the remembered activities took place. Without such a cogent relativistic perspective,

the present may be seen as but an extension of the past, but of lower quality. Thus, the parent or school official may think society has moved ahead and he/she has improved, but the younger people have degenerated, as attested by their "drugs," "trouble," and "criminal" activities.

#### Media Culture, Youth Culture, and School Crime

I have emphasized that the mass media interact with other aspects of culture in promoting youth as a real category. Together, the mass media and nostalgic reflections of former youth--adults--may unwittingly promote deviant activities among youth, including acts troublesome to school personnel.

Television programming is particularly likely to emphasize youth as a time of irresponsibility, searching, and fun. As Matza (1964) notes, adults value the bravado and independence of "hell raising," "being a bad ass," and the like, as long as this is confined to one time of your life--youth. It is not uncommon to hear adults recall their "hood" days among their friends; one even gets the impression that every "normal" adult is expected by his peers to have done at least one disreputable deed.

The cultural assumption that youth are incapable of

fulfilling "really important" roles can also promote deviance. For one thing, the ideal of striving to search for a legitimate adult identity may be simply ignored in favor of exploits equally enticing and more fun such as vandalism or violence or drug use. Involvements in such activities are also group mediated and therefore relevant to emerging identities. Within the pluralistic world of youth, many things are appropriate, especially when status and "rep" are defined vis-à-vis one's friends or authorities. In the latter case, to be against authority and to recognize its arbitrariness in limiting opportunities and fun, is to appraise the situation realistically, although that may not be sanctioned by the officials in question.

A further effect is to make authority seem more arbitrary and widen the constructed gap between adults and their youthful charges. Ultimately, this can make crime and other deviance more legitimate among youth, with greater consequences for their quest to outlive their inferior status and inherit new responsibilities within the world of occupations and responsibility. If adults foster definitions of troublemakers as "mere criminals," and then seek to enforce their will through criminal charges, new cultural content will be created

and youth will become more of a problem.

It must be emphasized that the mass media do not always directly determine actions; rather, repeated themes and images can play a large part in defining social reality and provide meaningful explanations of a variety of situations. Moreover, their impact is likely to be greatest on persons exposed to such messages at an early age. Since younger persons have a smaller stock of knowledge, they are more likely to incorporate new media presentations as relevant information about the social world. And, because young people are being exposed to media images at ever-earlier ages, they will be heavily influenced by such presentations. It is not surprising that "adolescence" appears at an earlier age today than, say, a decade ago. Stated differently, young people today can obtain a sense of what it is like to be 16 years old when they are 10. Not surprisingly, many do not wait until they are 16 to act 16. The upshot is that the problems of youth will appear earlier, last longer, and are likely to take newer forms.

#### Conclusion

Many of the points contained in this essay are conjectural. No effort has been made to rehash the claim

that mass media messages are solely responsible for youth culture and predispose some people to commit deviant acts. I believe that is the wrong approach. Instead, I have suggested that youth is a social construction that has been reified by adults and by each generation of young people. The mass media contribute to this process by updating symbolic meanings and potential footholds in the climb toward the elusive maturity of adult status. This is done by treating youth as both a product and a target of media culture. School-related crimes are but one manifestation of this process and therefore demand further investigation. I would further suggest that efforts to analyze the problem by imputing certain psychological qualities to some rule violators will be less fruitful than careful analysis of media images of youth, of how young people use the mass media, and, most important, of how mass-mediated information contributes to changing lifestyles, argots, and adult-authority perceptions involved in rule violations and other deviant activities. Good case studies, for example, of the process by which new rules come into being in specific schools, how they are enforced, how students perceive them, and what the consequences are for student-authority interaction, labeling of violators, and future rule infractions must be carried out. Only



in this way will the meaningful contexts of youth  
be understood and capable of resolution.

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