



Yale Journal of Law & the Humanities

Volume 6 | Issue 1

Article 5

January 1994

The University and the Mass Media

Umberto Eco

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.law.yale.edu/yjlh>

 Part of the [History Commons](#), and the [Law Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Umberto Eco, *The University and the Mass Media*, 6 YALE J.L. & HUMAN. (1994).

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.law.yale.edu/yjlh/vol6/iss1/5>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Yale Law School Legal Scholarship Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Yale Journal of Law & the Humanities by an authorized editor of Yale Law School Legal Scholarship Repository. For more information, please contact julian.aiken@yale.edu.

The University and the Mass Media

Umberto Eco*

In 1988, the University of Bologna celebrated its ninth centennial. The event was of such importance that the celebrations began in the fall of 1987 and ended happily in the springtime of 1989; otherwise, they could have continued uninterrupted until the dawn of the tenth centennial, like those trees decorated with bulbs for Christmas 1992 that are still lit up in many areas of New York City, ready for Christmas 1993.

In the course of these celebrations there was a congress on the history of universities, and I was asked to say something by way of a concluding speech about the relationship between the university and the mass media. I thought this was an important topic since no precise criteria exist for determining where the job of a historian ends and that of the journalist begins. If the reconstruction of what happened yesterday is history, why shouldn't the reconstruction of what is on the verge of happening also be history?

When I was requested by my friends at Yale to speak today on the same subject, I wondered if what I had said then could apply here. In my speech at Bologna, I focused on the problem from the point of view of European universities, and it is well known that the American situation is rather different. Is the relationship between the university and the mass media in the United States radically different from that in Europe, and in particular, from that in Italy?

Certainly, the American media provides reasonable coverage of university life. One finds in newspapers and in weekly magazines, statistics about the state of higher education and job opportunities, and regular ratings of the qualities of different universities. In Italy, universities are state-run institutions, a nonprofit, public service. In the United States, they are a business, and so the American media follows their status in the same way that it follows the status of firms on Wall Street or of General Motors. American universities also guarantee a reasonable level of education for the future ruling class, and academic

* I am grateful to Adrienne Defendi for her editorial assistance.

discussions, such as the one on the decline of literacy raised by Allan Bloom, become matters of public concern.

Moreover, there are events taking place on campus that rapidly become issues for the media, such as feminist criticism or the phenomenon of the politically correct. The media covers these university events with the same superficiality and the same penchant for scandal that it devotes to any other event. Recently, while perusing the satirical *Handbook of the Politically Correct*, I found that even the notion of "TEXT" is part of this new wave, and that it is now politically correct to say that there is no longer reality, but only texts. Nevertheless, if a student wants to know the course offerings in comparative literature, for example, at the University of Indiana, he has to pick up particular listings and annual bulletins, and not *Vanity Fair*.

In Italy, coverage of universities happens in quite a different way. At the beginning of every academic year, not only weekly magazines, but also newspapers devote pages upon pages to detailed information on what Gianni Vattimo will teach in Turin, Alberto Asor Rosa in Rome, or Vittorio Gregotti in Venice. The recurrent "crises" of the Italian university (which obviously began in Bologna in the year 1088) make newspaper editors salivate just as much as the latest love affair of a famous actor.

To demonstrate to what extent university affairs in Italy can become a *tarte à la crème* for the media, let me recount a personal experience I had recently. One month ago, I started my Norton Lectures at Harvard. I consider it a flattering appointment, and I must admit that there was a particular aspect of the event which would have interested an Italian newspaper: namely, that in 1985, Italo Calvino was supposed to have given his own Norton Lectures, but he died before finishing writing the sixth lecture and before delivering the first. One would think that such a coincidence might have been worthy of a brief write-up in the cultural section. In fact, the *Corriere della Sera* devoted a whole page to my first Norton Lecture and, the day after, the *Repubblica*, furious for having missed the scoop of the year, devoted an entire page to it, and then two more articles in the weeks following to report that I had also given the second and third lectures. I can only thank these newspapers for the attention they have devoted to me, but the fact that an Italian scholar gives a series of lectures abroad should not be a particularly newsworthy event; not, in other words, a case of "man biting dog," but of "dog biting man."

I think the Italian media was so obsessed by an ordinary academic event because, in a country where today it is easier to meet a deputy in a state prison than in the House of Parliament, there is a secret hope that the "Hall of Wisdom" will be more respectable than the

“Hall of Power,” and because Italian newspapers are also desperately looking for public figures who are not notorious mobsters.

But there is more. Italian talk shows, where people behave as if they were taking part in the massacre of Saint Valentine’s Eve, are inundated with university professors. The formula of the talk show is the following: there must be an actor or some other figure whose function is to provoke and to increase the tension of the discussion; then, a mad scientist (let’s say a discoverer of the elixir of long life, or an amateur archeologist who has found the real location of Noah’s Ark) must be provoked, so as to entertain the audience with his or her madness; and, finally, a university professor who represents the Voice of Truth, of Specialized Knowledge and/or of Common Sense. By the end of the show, it is very difficult to distinguish the university professor from the mad scientist or from the actor, and all of them are shouting in a quite undignified way.

The main difference between the American and the European university is that the former is set on a campus, a sort of monastery separated from the city. In America, there is not a real conflict between “Town” and “Gown” because the Gowns live outside of Town. In Europe, the university is placed in the center of the city, is a part of the city, and so is continuously involved with city life. Neither students nor professors can completely ignore civic life, which explains why in Europe there are so many university professors who become members of the parliament without interrupting their involvement in university life. Similarly, it is not exceptional, but rather customary, for a university professor to write as a columnist, critic, or political commentator for newspapers and magazines.

In the United States, when scholars like Kissinger or Brezinsky decide to collaborate with the government, they leave the campus and return only at the end of their public appointment. In Europe, however, there is a direct line linking the Hall of Power to the Hall of Wisdom. Although American professors spend most of their time on the telephone in order to maintain a continuous exchange of information—or even gossip—they do so only from campus to campus. It is a mere Gown-to-Gown jungle drumming.

I think, however, that the mutual influence between the media and the university exists in America as in Europe, though perhaps in a different or less obvious way. The boundaries between the university and the mass media are much less clear than one might think, and it is necessary to draw a map of the many ambiguous and gray areas in order to identify *les liaisons dangereuses*, the hybrids, the grafts, and the half-castes. So let me present a typology of eleven different aspects of this continuous and inevitable mutual influence.

I. THE MASS MEDIA VERSUS HIGH CULTURE

We could approach the problem according to what I would call the Frankfurt School point of view. The mass media is a vehicle of banality, of superficial amusement; it searches for novelty for the sake of novelty, and it attempts to inculcate consensus among the masses. In contrast, the university is the place of original research, of serious and painful meditation. It maintains a direct link to tradition; it is suspicious of novelty and convenience, wants to produce a continuous critical revision of knowledge, and looks for the approval of an elite.

I remember, however, once having met Theodor Adorno after his return to Europe. This man, who had written *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* to condemn the irreparable vulgarity of the mass media (at that time, mainly radio), told me that if he were to rewrite this book, his judgment would be less severe since he had experienced the positive role of television in creating a new democratic culture in postwar Germany.

Moreover, at the time when Adorno was writing, the difference between highbrow, middlebrow, and lowbrow culture was more clear-cut than it is today. One of the main issues in today's culture—at least in Western countries—is the merging of pop and high culture that many theorists consider characteristic of our postmodern age. This fact of postmodern culture deeply problematizes earlier descriptions of “high” versus “low” culture. Just a few days ago, I was reading a beautiful book by Brian McHale, *Constructing Postmodernism*, in which the relationships between John Barth and William Gibson, and Pynchon and the cyberpunk culture are shown in all their intricacy. The merging of pop and high culture thus produces an overlapping of the raw materials and the concerns of the media and the university.

II. THE MASS MEDIA AND DIRECT INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION

One could say that the university permits a direct, interpersonal communication, whereas the mass media is characterized by a long-distance, indirect communication. Mass communication takes place when a centralized Sender transmits a message by a technologically complex channel that reaches a community of Addressees scattered all over a vast region. These Addressees are diverse in their social ranks, cultures, and even languages. Thus, mass communication is inherently not a direct, interpersonal interaction. The Sender does not know to whom he is speaking and so he must orient his message to a ghost Addressee, from whom he cannot receive any immediate feedback.

What is the situation of the university? If the mass media is not a homogeneous institution—given that a book published by a university press and the latest rock-music record are both products of the mass media—neither is the university itself. It is a place where high-level research is performed, but it is also a place from which elementary notions and basic information are disseminated.

Can we say that the university is still the place for direct, interpersonal communication between teacher and student? What happens when a professor lectures to five hundred students in one hall in Italy, the capacity of which is at the most three hundred? Have the remaining two hundred students, crowded in a corridor where the lecturer's voice is broadcast over a loud speaker, automatically entered the realm of mass-media communications? Can we say that the student who follows the lesson, taking notes which he will not be able to decipher later, is part of a direct, interpersonal dialogue? And what about the one who tapes the lecture and then listens to it weeks later? Has the student thereby become a user of a mass medium?

III. THE ACADEMIC STUDY OF THE MASS MEDIA

The university studies the mass media. I am always astonished when, in the course of certain interviews, American journalists ask me how a humanist scholar can also have written essays on Superman and Charlie Brown. It seems that they have forgotten that during the fifties (before I was involved in the study of mass media), there were American journals which included subtle analyses of detective stories, comics, and Tin Pan Alley music. These journalists have likewise overlooked the studies of Robert Merton on the role of radio in wartime propaganda, and those of Cantril on the effect of Orson Welles's "War of the Worlds" (all written in the late forties), which were *livres de chevet* for European cultural sociologists.

Indeed, credit must be given to the university establishment for having undertaken, despite much opposition, the first systematic study of the civilization of mass communication, and for having devoted entire schools and departments to the study of this phenomenon. Perhaps today we have gone too far. All too often, the mass media is analyzed, even when all that there is to know has already been investigated. One smiles at times when thinking of the numerous studies which suggest that the obsessive image of white in detergent-powder advertisements is engendered by certain archetypal motivations. A first-year student can read all about this in glossy magazines, for which university professors also write. It would be sufficient simply to ask the advertising agents, who usually have had a good university education and have read Jung. Nevertheless, it is the university that has been

studying the mass media and that has helped generate critical resistance among the public at large.

At most, we can say that in Europe the academic analysis of media has had a greater impact on society than in the United States. In the United States, the studies of Merton or Cantril are neither read nor discussed in high schools and elementary schools; in Europe, a critical awareness of mass-media strategies—also as vehicles for ideologies—has frequently influenced the educational curriculum. More and more often, conscientious teachers in elementary and high schools prepare their students to think critically of the mass media by analyzing advertisements or newspapers in the classroom.

IV. THE UNIVERSITY IN SERVICE OF THE MASS MEDIA

The independence of the university from political power is merely a pastoral illusion or wishful thinking. Nine hundred years ago, the University of Bologna acquired its freedom and autonomy because three of its professors assisted the Emperor in a legal controversy with the Church. In exchange for their collaboration, the Emperor signed the first document which established the university's independence. Similarly, the Collège de France was born of a political initiative on the part of François the First to counteract the overwhelming power of the Sorbonne.

It is not unusual for university professors to become consultants of financial and industrial companies, or of the political establishment (from Irnerio to Kissinger). There is nothing surprising about the fact that mass-media experts become mass-media consultants. I believe that an expert who understands some of the mechanisms of mass-media manipulation should be able to conduct research independent of profit-making interests. Yet, I wonder if my position suffers from a certain leftist bigotry. We would not be surprised if an expert on mass communications worked as a consultant for a campaign on ecological education or on AIDS prevention, just as it seems natural to us that most university professors collaborate with publishing houses.

Some compromises between the university and the centers of economic and political power are more acceptable than others, since they have been condoned and institutionalized by tradition. If we consider the collaborations of eminent teachers of the Renaissance with the first famous printers, and if we reread the authoritative prefaces full of praise in the books of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, then we realize that the relationship between the scholar and the publishing industry has been established for quite some time. Let us not overlook the fact that, since Aristotle's and Plato's time, the model scholar has been also the prince's advisor. If an inextricable knot has existed between the controllers and the controlled within the univer-

sity since the invention of the printing press, the development of mass media has only made this knot even more intricate.

V. THE MASS MEDIA EXPLOITS THE UNIVERSITY

Let us imagine the strictly honorable position of a scholar who analyzes the persuasive mechanisms of mass media, independent of financial and advisory assistance. From the viewpoint of the morality of intentions, such a scholar is beyond suspicion. But if he publishes the results of his research, then the mass media may obtain and exploit it. Hence, the scholar's critical description of forbidden procedures of persuasion may become an unintended contribution to the application of those very procedures.

This problem obviously exists for every discipline. The chemist knows very well that if he writes a paper on Oriental poisons, a murderer could potentially use the information. However, the chemist regards such research as a description of something that exists independent of one's writing about it. In contrast, in the social sciences, the scholar is incessantly obsessed by the danger of creating a phenomenon by simply describing it.

A book of essays on Madonna, recently published in the United States, includes a variety of quotations from deconstructionist literature, semiotics, Heidegger, and so on (and anything else, provided that they were *à la page*). Do the essays present a critical analysis of the Madonna phenomenon, or do they contribute to the reinforcement of the Madonna myth?

Let us not be excessively moralistic. Do we think that such an enormous amount of discussion devoted to Madonna is more reprehensible than that devoted to cholesterol? Scientists had studied cholesterol because it was their obligation, but frankly, every responsible weight-watcher had been informed about the effects and consequences of cholesterol for quite some time. Then suddenly, the media started to exploit the cholesterol issue, and we witnessed the incredible story of the cholesterol hoax—vegetables were advertised as cholesterol-free in the supermarkets. A respectable scientific investigation was adopted by the mass media and by the food industry, and then exploited purely for profit.

VI. THE UNIVERSITY TRAINS A WORK FORCE FOR THE MASS MEDIA

The preparation of a work force for the mass media is perhaps more typical of the American situation than of the European one. But in fact, in universities all over the world, there are courses which train students to perform according to the standards defined by newspa-

pers, television networks, and publishing houses. In principle, there is nothing strange about this, since the university prepares students to become lawyers, physicians, and businessmen. However, these professions evolved together with educational institutions that trained the students for particular jobs in addition to their philosophy, ethical standards, and operational practices—from deontology, from blood-letting to the Hippocratic oath. In the case of the mass media, newspapers, advertising, cinema, and television have existed and developed independently of formal educational institutions, which might have defined their ideal conditions. We thus have the paradox that within the same university, the department of communication technology teaches a practice that the department of political science or philosophy criticizes as ethically questionable.

One might think that the university survives on this plurality of viewpoints. Unfortunately, however, when and where this happens, there is no example of integration of differing perspectives. Communications students learn how to become journalists according to the current criteria, whereas philosophy students learn how to criticize journalism as a perversion of the search for truth. In academic institutions, the two perspectives can coexist honorably side by side, but the two lines of thought will generate two different kinds of citizens and future professionals who will ignore each other for the rest of their lives.

VII. THE UNIVERSITY USES THE MASS MEDIA

Even if many university representatives continue to ignore the mass media, the university, nevertheless, uses it for good as well as bad ends. The mass media now accomplishes some didactic functions that once were performed by the university. At one time, teachers themselves had to supply didactic materials, often in manuscripts or typescripts, while today these are produced by the culture industry in a convenient form that is economically accessible.

Information and ideas once disseminated by educational institutions are now transmitted directly by the mass media. For example, once upon a time schools had to teach students where Mogadishu was and where the borders of Kuwait were, while today this information is communicated directly by newspapers and television. This does not imply, however, that educational institutions are any less involved with the dissemination of such information. The mass media transmits this information in an uncritical and unmonitored fashion, and it is the responsibility of the educational system to check and correct it. Today, it is more important that the university criticizes the mass media's account of fundamental ideas and information, rather than actually transmitting this knowledge itself.

The convenience with which all the basic texts of literature, philosophy, history, and science are available offers the student multiple sources of information and enables him or her to debate the professor's line of thinking. The professor teaches Russell and the student reads Husserl instead. This may constitute a reason for panic. The professor can no longer hide his lack of knowledge, and he bears responsibility, in a certain sense, for all the texts that the culture industry has put on the market.

Among other things, it must be noted that the publishing industry, by way of choosing which texts are made available, influences the subjects that will be studied in the next ten years. It can be argued that university professors dominate this selective process. But it so happens that a small group of influential scholars, through their editorial selections, will influence or determine the editorial selections of their colleagues who are encouraged to follow their same scholarly agenda.

VIII. THE MASS MEDIA PROVIDES ISSUES FOR THE UNIVERSITY

Many issues that are widely discussed in American universities today originated on one campus, but were then publicized and later adopted by other campuses only as a result of media hype. Let me cite, for example, such issues as multiculturalism, gender-oriented criticism, political correctness, and postmodernism. The problem is the following: Is there a change in scholarly standards when these issues move from the campus to the mass media? The answer is certainly affirmative. Should we be concerned about this transferring of issues from college campuses to the news media? Perhaps. Often we have complained that certain problems, important to society and to the public conscience, have remained confined to academic discourse, which has ultimately excluded the public at large. This current phenomenon of migrating issues requires that we exercise a critical vigilance so that the issues are neither misunderstood nor rendered trivial. In other words, it requires that we take on the challenge of examining this phenomenon and its consequences.

Also, the universe of bookstores, at one time a temple of culture, is now subject to the laws of mass-media communications. In the last twenty or thirty years, I have enjoyed observing the mass media's changing attitudes toward culture, as demonstrated in the variety of sections in bookstores. In the early sixties, Marx, Freud, Structuralism, and Husserl—if one could even find them in bookstores—were all shelved together in the section on “Continental Philosophy.” By the mid-sixties, these same books were in the section on “Structuralism,” which included Marxism, Psychoanalysis, and Phenomenology. Then, in the seventies, these same authors and topics appeared in the section on “Poststructuralism” or “Semiotics, Cinema, and Feminism”

(as I noted in a bookstore on Saint Mark's Place in the East Village of New York City). Recently, in the Harvard Cooperative Bookstore, I found subjects such as semiotics, linguistics, neurology, psychology, and post-analytic philosophy classified under "Cognitive Studies." In a commercial chain bookstore in New York City, Saint Augustine was shelved in the "New Age" section. Can the universities remain isolated from these changing cultural fads? Moreover, can the same publishing houses, which for the most part determine the agenda of university curricula, maintain their independence from these changes?

IX. THE UNIVERSITY EXPLOITS MASS-MEDIA TECHNIQUES

The university may decide to utilize the mass media as an instrument to broaden its area of influence. The successful experiments of the Open University, an educational institution for adults and an alternative for working students, demonstrate how the coordinated use of printed booklets, tapes, and video cassettes may help to create a mass university circuit. But this excessive availability of information may also have a paralyzing effect. The mass media is certainly indispensable in order to reach, above all, those who are excluded from the circle of cultural information, yet it cannot replace the direct didactic relationship, the immediate interpersonal dialogue of the university setting. We may pretend to ignore it, but the university establishment utilizes mass media as an influential tool in academic controversies. The scientific debates carried on in newspapers are not a novelty of this century. What is certainly new is the role of television debates in influencing opinions regarding important scientific policy decisions, such as the use or the rejection of nuclear power.

Another example of the influence of the mass media on academic opinion is the alleged discovery of Heidegger's Nazism. That Heidegger was sympathetic to Nazism has been a well-known fact since the fifties. In the early sixties, I remember reviewing a book by Dagobert Runes, published in the United States, in which Heidegger's political speeches were reprinted. Every serious scholar knew this dark side of Heidegger's personal life and was aware of the philosophical problem of whether or not his philosophy was dependent on (or determined by) his political positions. I am not a Heidegger fan, but I find this attempt to dismantle Heidegger's philosophy—or the alleged Heideggerianism of other American or continental thinkers—on the basis of such biographical gossip simply to be mass-media sensationalism. We cannot deny the importance of Voltaire's role in the development of Western thought simply because he invested part of his financial holdings in the slave market—he was indifferent to this ethical problem and merely a product of his times.

I am not saying that these aspects of a philosopher's or a writer's personal life should not be taken into consideration by serious scholars. On the contrary, I think that they should be taken seriously and not left solely to the mass media's appetite for scandal. Not to read Céline because he was anti-Semitic is a mistake engendered by the mass media. Nor can we simply absolve Céline of his anti-Semitism because he had an intimate relationship with a Jewish woman. These are, rather, important reasons why we should in fact study both his works *and* his psychology. Even so, his work still stands on its own, independent of his personal history.

X. THE MASS MEDIA INFLUENCES UNIVERSITY LIFE

The mass media has also brought the university into the world of celebrities, and we often ask ourselves if the fame of certain scholars is truly linked to their intellect and accomplishments or, instead, merely to their images as created by television and glossy magazines. The media system is so powerful that it successfully makes news not only of the impudence of those who appear every day on television, but also of the privacy of those who have retired from the public eye. Even absences are transformed into news by the celebrity press. Not only those who publish a book per year make the news, but also those who never publish anything at all. There are scholars who can make their silence speak, and if they do not succeed at this, a good reporter will help them. Some publishing houses specialize in making famous those who have never published a line in the course of their lives, and perhaps the greatest prospects are given to those who have left not even a single manuscript.

Equally embarrassing is the influence of the mass media on students. The 1968 student demonstrations were influenced by the intervention of the mass media, which encouraged their almost simultaneous spreading to different countries, and resulted in protests with similar patterns. Yet, although we might consider the major 1968 demonstrations as an inevitable historical phenomenon, this is not true of many subsequent, smaller-scale demonstrations. These later protests often occurred because various groups of students aimed at copying the image of those portrayed by the mass media.

Finally, the mass media has a tendency to make a spectacle of university life. The announcement of a study is presented, alternatively, as a discovery, as a cautious experiment, and as the achievement of a universal panacea. Needless to say, serious scholars will try to avoid such celebrity performances. They will, however, inevitably become victims of such a system, and the more they attempt to keep out of the eye of the mass media, the more vulnerable they will become.

The tremendous ease of publishing, producing preprints, printing by computers, and faxing one's own work one or two years before it will actually be printed (and often when no one would be willing to print it) is causing an obstruction in scientific communication. This exponential growth of available scientific material is dramatically affecting the division of knowledge. When a scholar receives, daily, hundreds of pages regarding his scientific research, he will surely remain in the dark about studies in other related fields. Unfortunately, it has now become impossible for scholars to follow even the contributions in their own area of specialization, which has resulted in the production and the consumption of abstracts. Abstracts are a media service; an abstract is a text that has been interpreted and filtered by someone else. Thus, the scholar's foremost responsibility of reading, interpreting, and independently judging a text is passed on to an editor of abstracts.

Next to the dictatorship of the abstract, there is the threat of complete bibliographies on any topic, which can now be acquired through information networks. An actual bibliography is something that must be conquered step by step, with painful and deliberate effort. A complete bibliography, however, is worth nothing because it cannot be consulted. The scholar who, by pressing a key, receives a bibliography of ten thousand titles on a topic of his choice, not only will be unable to read the suggested books, but will never even read the bibliography itself.

Signs of this crisis appear in many publications of recent years from countries that consider themselves to be in the vanguard of innovative research. Today, no bibliography includes titles that are over ten years old. While this criterion is justifiable for some disciplines that undergo constant change, it raises concern for studies in the humanities, which are cumulative by nature.

XI. THE SUICIDE OF THE MASS MEDIA

Mass-media technologies are threatened by an incurable disease—the perishability of the actual materials which document and transmit information. The video tapes, the recordings on magnetic discs, and the photocopied pages are all perishable. Even the book, the principal instrument for the dissemination of knowledge, has become perishable. All the books published since we went from rag paper to wood paper are destined to become dust within a period of seventy years. The mass media has allowed the proliferation and circulation of books which do not survive their authors. All the methods (e.g., microfilm, reprinting on acid-free paper, chemical protection of existing books) that have been applied in order to avoid this tragic

inconvenience will only be able to save part of the testimonies of our culture.

One of the historical responsibilities of the university for decades to come will be to select which books are to receive privileged treatment, and which books are to disappear. This is a tremendous responsibility, and I would not like to belong to any committee appointed to make such decisions.

CONCLUSION

I have not exhausted this polemic on the relationships between the university and the mass media. I realize that I have offered the image of an ill-defined and tormented situation, in which the one who claims to be pure lies, and in which everyone must take responsibility for his own unstable equilibrium. It does not make sense to make a big issue of the presence of the mass media in the ivory towers of research. We must both acknowledge its inevitable influence and exploit its possibilities. Finally, it must be remembered that the university, with however little or however much good it still has, can resist the pernicious influence of the mass media by exploiting its very weaknesses.

Although it may seem paradoxical, if we define the value of information in terms of unexpected knowledge, then the mass media may inform with regard to facts, but not with regard to concepts and the interpretation of facts. The mass media tells us that so-and-so is dead, that a plane has crashed, that the dollar has fallen, or that a political crisis has erupted. Even in cases like these, I doubt that the information is truly so unexpected. For example, during the last decade, the mass media discovered that we as a society are entering a civilization of images, a fact reported by sociologists some forty years ago. The new civilization of the computer is an alphabetic one, and we are returning to Gutenberg's galaxy. The mass media, however, cannot report this because people would not believe it. People have had to face too many difficulties in order finally to accept the idea that we live in a civilization of images; the public can no longer renounce what has now become a cliché due to the great effort by which it was attained.

The mass media can report the news of a study of a certain particle in a specific laboratory, but it cannot offer a suitable interpretation of that event. In the area of facts, the mass media reports what is happening now, but in the area of interpretation, it can only say what was already expected twenty years ago.

The culture, knowledge, and theories generated by the university find their proper place within this gap of twenty years. What the university studies today is what the media will incorporate into its agenda, into its system of accepted assumptions, twenty years from

now. I believe that students still come into our lecture halls because they realize that there is something being discussed which the mass media has not yet encountered. When the mass media eventually gets around to reporting it, the university will already be—will have to be—discussing something else.

If we are able to maintain this gap, we will still have a role to play, and indeed an invaluable one.