THE MIND MANAGERS
-a review

by Lucie Cantrell

Schiller sets the tone for his book in his opening paragraph:

"America's media managers create, process, refine, and preside over the circulation of images and information which determine our beliefs and attitudes and, ultimately, our behaviour. When they deliberately produce messages that do not correspond to the realities of social existence, the media managers become mind managers. Messages that intentionally create a false sense of reality and produce a consciousness that cannot comprehend or wilfully rejects the actual conditions of life, personal or social, are manipulative messages."

(Schiller, 1973, p.1)

He states that when manipulation is successful the status quo is preserved and the set mind of society is such that alternative solutions to social problems cannot be considered. He points out that the upward mobility possible to the individual in North America obscures the sharp lines of demarcation between the "haves" and the "have nots". We think that "free enterprise" is talking about the little guy making good, the Horatio Alger success story, whereas in reality it is talking about the unchecked growth, power, and profit of the large corporations. He is not actually writing about conspiracy per se, although he does not discount the possibilities that are programmed into our existence by the way the media operate. He goes on to declare that where initially this control was exerted in the service of consumerism, increasingly it is moving to the government and the military and it is also increasingly being exerted in other parts of the world and not only in North America.

First, let us look at Schiller's view how this control is exercised. He says that there are five myths that lull us into believing that we are in control, that we are not manipulated by subtle managers:

The Myth of Individualism and Personal Choice Schiller suggests is related to ideals of the free speech, every boy can be president, and so on. The reality is that upward mobility is statistically rare, that the free
enterprise system benefits big business, and that it is the media not the individual that have opportunity to get their views across to the world.

The Myth of Neutrality leads us to believe in the objectivity of the media - it is suggested that, for example, news is reported impartially, social unrest is reported objectively. This myth leads us to believe that societal institutions such as education, government, science, do not function in response to needs, pressures and biases as do individuals, but that they are somehow "above that", operating in a rarified atmosphere of dedication to the public good - all of which Schiller suggests are false notions.

The Myth of Unchanging Human Nature is the alibi for the time when the inadequacies of our society become apparent, when violence erupts, when poverty becomes visible. He says:

"What human nature is seen to be ultimately affects the way human beings behave, not because they must act as they do but because they believe they are expected to act this way."

(Schiller, p.13)

The ethological theories of man suggest that he is the territorial, aggressive primate offer an explanation satisfactory to a society dedicated to consumerism, ambition, the success syndrome, and the preservation of the status quo.

The Myth of the Absence of Social Conflict, Schiller points out the media's unwillingness to deal with social conflict as opposed to personal violence. TV may have its half a dozen murders per hour, but such activities as peace marches and labour disputes (except strikes), receive little coverage if any. "Elite control requires omission or distortion of social reality."

(p.17)

The Myth of Media Pluralism - we can flip our dials to up to twelve or more TV channels, we can find twenty radio stations on our sets, we have still maybe a couple of newspapers to chose from in some large cities, as well as many magazines with seemingly different approaches. Schiller sees us as believing that we have a veritable plethora of information and reportage to select from and he suggests that we are fooling ourselves. With wire service and the media biases, there are so many filters stopping the flow of information to us, that actually wherever we turn a curious eye or ear we
will still, in the main, see what we are supposed to see, hear what we are supposed to hear: support of the status quo, support of consumerism, support of the government, plus a juicy spice of sex and violence to keep us passive.

One can reflect how our Canadianism can fit into this model. If you endorse Schiller’s five myth concept and extend it to Canada, it would seem that Canadians could be lulled into even more complacency than their American neighbours. Thinking that we have access to even more information via Canadian sources, thinking of violence as belonging more on the American scene than the Canadian, it could be argued that it becomes even easier for us here in Canada to sit back smugly and endorse the societal status quo.

After talking about the myths that lead us into an acceptance of society as it is and a belief that we are in control of our own minds, Schiller goes on to discuss techniques that are important in perpetuating our acceptance. He refers to the concepts of fragmentation, (p.24) We do not get a flow of meaningfully related chunks of information that build up into some unified whole of understanding and comprehension, but rather we get a peppering of buckshot blasts of unrelated items. The front page of the newspaper is broken into many unrelated columns (mostly dislocated again by being continued on another page); TV has a fast paced, rapid change format continually being further broken up by advertising messages. Schiller says:

"Talk shows, which proliferate in the broadcasting media, are perfect models of fragmentation as a format. The occasional insertion of a controversial subject or individual in a multi-item program totally defuses, as well as trivializes, controversy. Whatever is said is swallowed up in subsequent commercials, gags, bosoms, and gossip. Yet the matter does not end there. Programmes of this nature are extolled as evidence of the system’s freewheeling tolerance. The media and their controllers boast of the openness of the communications system that permits such critical material to be aired to the nation. Mass audiences accept this argument and are persuaded that they have access to a free flow of opinion."

(Schiller, p.26)

It has been suggested that this process can be compared to the replaceable parts of McLuhan’s Mechanical Bride (p.98), when he talks of our “replaceable parts” of our cultural dynamics. When our culture objectifies women – “the walk”, “the legs”, “the hips”, and so on, in effect they are being
fragmented and served up with a sauce of sex and sensationalism in the same way that our news, the data of our lives, is fragmented and sensationalized in our various media. Schiller goes on to say that in addition to fragmentation as a technique that lulls us into unaware complacency there are also the techniques of immediacy and overload. (p.27) (It should be reiterated that where fragmentation, immediacy and overload are referred to as techniques, this is not to suggest conscious conspiracy. Rather it is an identification of elements discovered in an analysis of the conjunct development of the mass media and the mass society. These elements have furthered the aims of the corporate sector and government, and as a consequence have been employed more and more in their interest.) We get our news "hot off the press"; tomorrow's paper arrives tonight; we are always getting the latest word, we never have time to integrate these bits and pieces into something meaningful. We are stunned by the deluge of material, and furthermore, the mechanism of selective attention as detailed by Klapper (1960, p.19) filters out for us (and by us) that which is strange, disturbing or difficult. Schiller says:

"An additional dimension of fragmentation is achieved when the informational system avails itself of the new communications technology. The flow of disconnected information is speeded up and, with some justification, complaints about "information overload" increase. Actually, there is no excess of meaningful information. Just as advertising disrupts concentration and renders trivial the information it interrupts, the new and efficient technology of information-handling permits the transmission of torrents of irrelevant information, further undermining the individuals' almost hopeless search for meaning." (p.27)

He concludes that the result of this process is passivity. Blake and Haroldsen say that one result of this process is what they refer to as narcotizing dysfunction:

"...the accumulation (from mass media) of information concerning public issues, and the substitution of this awareness — or knowledge — for social action. This is often done on the assumption that since there is such awareness, some person (or group, or agency) must be taking some kind of action.

(Blake and Haroldsen, 1975, p.85)

And so, ultimately there can be a phenomenon such as that of the murder of Kitty Genovese in New York City in 1964 which, as you will remember, took over half hour to accomplish, with no one coming to her aid; this despite the fact that her cries for help and her struggles were observed by
many apartment dwellers adjacent to the scene of the crime. (Latane and Darley, 1973, p.196) ("I did not even phone the police". This is the "diffusion of responsibility" theory.) This case highlights the passivity which Schiller suggests is engendered in mass society by such mass media techniques as fragmentation, immediacy and overload. Klapper describes this condition as follows:

"... a possible or even probable widespread atrophy of creative and critical powers, a socially general lethargic compliance, and a predominantly dependent and passive pattern of behaviour."

(Klapper, 1960, p.235)

We have discussed how the mass media manage the minds of the mass society. This was the first theme developed in Schiller's book. His second and more alarming contention is that this control is to a large extent being taken over by the government. He suggests that in industrial society with its need for technological expertise there has arisen a new and growing class of individuals, "the knowledge workers". They are educated, aware, may be well paid, yet are just cogs in the industrial machine. They are more aware of the inadequacies in our social structure than is the rest of the labour force, thus the management of these persons becomes more difficult. He says, "The university student population alone is now more than half the size of the nation's corps of production workers in manufacturing." (p.15) It is this group particularly that has influenced the government to join more and more in the mind management game. The first move was to question publicly the objectivity of the media. This was largely accomplished by Spiro Agnew and was done more to ensure the media's continued and expanded cooperation than to disturb what had been a quite harmonious and mutually facilitative relationship. More and more the government has been moving into the use of techniques deliberately designed to manipulate the mass society. Schiller describes these techniques as follows: First, the networks can be influenced to suppress controversial issues "not in the public interest", for example, civil liberties demonstrations. Secondly, more and more, the government is actively moving into mind management by such techniques as these:

- top level briefing of news executives;
- personal presidential visits;
- packaged press releases;
- nationally televised presidential press conferences;
the staged event, as Nixon's return from China in 1972
when he arrived dramatically by helicopter to meet
with Congress for the benefit of a nation which was bound to
sit transfixed before their prime-time TV sets;
- recreational, TV embedded material, e.g., football half-time
  patriotic messages;
- the poll — "Information surveys are employed increasingly
to create the atmosphere sought by the information man-
gers at the highest level" (Schiller, p.165)

Schiller says that "information control has become part of national policy".
and he goes on to remind us that since 1970 the U.S. nation has had a chief
censor ready to institute press censorship in the event of a presidentially
decreed national emergency.

Schiller does not believe in the inevitability of the continued manipulation
of industrial society in the service of preservation of the good economy
and the governmental and institutional status quo. He believes that as
more people are becoming sophisticated in their understanding of media,
media will be demystified and as more people work with various forms of
media — AV, tape recorders, film, etc., the great public passivity may de-
crease. To quote:

"The involvement of many people in the media, on their own initiative
and out of their own desire to communicate, is ultimately the strongest
defence any society has against information control and mind management."  
(Schiller, p.189)

He feels that despite the tremendous resources available to the mind mana-
gers there is a growing understanding by at least part of society of how we
are manipulated. He states: "... a gradually heightened consciousness,
'despite more tightly controlled communications system, may develop its own
means to force the social changes so desperately needed in this country
today." (p.191)

The forecast of Schiller's reminded me of the Consciousness III concept
of Charles Reich which he develops in his book, THE GREENING OF
AMERICA. He uses the word "consciousness" to represent a concept more
all-encompassing than ideology, to represent, in a sense, the world view
of society. Within Reich's model, Consciousness I represents individualism,
ideals of the pioneer; Consciousness II represents the values of the organ-
izational society, where, on the whole, North America is today. Of Con-
"We have been dulled and blinded to the injustice and ugliness of slums, but it (Consciousness III) sees them as just that – injustice and ugliness – as if they had been there to see all along. We have all been persuaded that giant organizations are necessary, but it sees that they are absurd, as if the absurdity had always been obvious and apparent. We have all been induced to give up our dreams of adventure and romance in favor of the escalator of success, but it says that the escalator is a sham and the dream is real ... For one who thought the world was irrevocably encased in metal and plastic and sterile stone, it seems a veritable green; anding of America." (Reich, 1970, p.395)

I found Schiller's analysis to be a tightly reasoned and believable argument that the beliefs and values of our mass society have been influenced to a great extent by the mass media. What came to mind is a situation close to home which, I feel, is rather analogous. As you probably know, just west of York University is Edgeley Valley, a largely Ontario Housing community. It has many problems – truantism, crime, poverty, (it has a high percentage of welfare recipients), and is one of the high catchments for the Ontario Psychiatric Hospital. According to the best mind management practices, Consciousness II attitudes, York University should see itself as an elitist institution – no communication should flow between "town" and "gown". And, let me add, in a large measure this is the way it is. But the interesting thing is that this is not entirely the case. Somehow, some small communication has been established between York and Edgeley Valley, here and there. Some York people have acted as resource people to this community. There has been some student volunteer work done – for example, a drop-in centre for teenagers, a summer camp for younger kids. People from York, who are registered with the York Speakers' Bureau, have met with local groups.

I feel that Schiller was right when he said that the forces that control our mass media would prefer if this sort of thing did not happen. However, I feel that the Edgeley Valley story also supports his statement that mind management is not entirely successful and that here and there, in small ways, heightened consciousness does emerge. I am not very optimistic about the final outcome, but I maintain that Schiller presented a clear picture of an obscured and diffused issue.