Standardization and Diversity in American Print Culture, 1880 to the Present

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Chapter 9 explored the commercial production of reading materials by examining the role of gender in the magazine industry. This chapter enlarges the canvas to include all sorts of diversity in books, magazines, and newspapers. It looks at the interplay of culture, marketing, education, and politics in fostering or reducing the diversity of printed materials in America.

At any given time, literacy can serve both cultural diversity and cultural consolidation, but the mix between those functions shifts over time. The content of newspapers, magazines, and books does not pre-determine how readers will use them, but the level of standardization in these print forms does set some limits. Access to a great diversity of printed materials is not possible if diverse printed materials are not produced; conversely, cultural consolidation through exposure to shared information, heroes, and symbols can only occur if the common messages are widely produced and distributed.

Diversity is a difficult concept to define and measure. The immigrant press, for example, was diverse in language but often assimilationist in content; a paper in Lithuanian that advertised national brand-name products thus performed both functions. Furthermore, there is a big difference between ideological and topical diversity. Defining diversity as "the range of themes, styles, and messages available at a given time," Paul DiMaggio drew a contrast between mass culture, which tends to standardize, and two types of diverse production systems. Materials of "class culture" are produced for tightly segmented markets based on class or status groupings; those of "pluralistic culture" are based more on differences of taste and interest. Writing in 1977, DiMaggio judged pluralistic cultural production to be thriving whereas class-culture production had waned somewhat. In addition to this shift of balance in diverse production systems, further consolidation of mass culture has occurred since 1977, particularly in book publishing.

Reading materials whose audience is defined by such important social-status groupings as race, gender, and class (DiMaggio's class culture) generally have stronger ideological implications than those based on differences in topical interests and leisure pursuits (DiMaggio's pluralistic culture). I have therefore termed the two types "ideological" and "topical." Herbert Gans, arguing against the "decline-and-fall school of social analysis," made a similar point in 1961: "Once upon a time, the story goes, America was diverse in peoples and cultures, but today it is a society of middle-class conformists." Gans agreed that although ethnic and regional subcultures had declined, new forms of diversity had replaced the old. "Much of the declining diversity was based on traditions and on constraint; much of the present diversity is a result of the enlargement of choice." In spite of the emphasis Gans and DiMaggio have placed on the expansion of diversity based on preferences rather than on primary social identities, this chapter will argue that some areas of publishing that expanded in the 1960s and 1970s represent genuine ideological diversity—the feminist press, the fundamentalist press, gay periodicals, and black-owned book publishing, for example.

Although we should keep in mind the distinction between ideological and topical diversity, both are woven in and out of this chapter's analysis. Diversity is defined here in terms of the number of publications, their independence from one another in terms of control, their topical variety, and their ideological variety. Standardization, conversely, is illustrated in this essay by evidence that more people were reading the same publications, by the consolidation of control, and by a reduction in the diversity of language, topics, and ideology. Thus, for example, wire services boosted standardization, whereas paperback books encouraged diversity.

Diversity in print has been created by many forces in American history: regionalism, immigration, freedom of expression, racism, creativity, class stratification, and the sheer geographic immensity of the country. Some of these forces are positive features of American life, whereas others clearly are not. The literature of the oppressed may have power and beauty, but we do not therefore celebrate oppression. On the other hand, the mass culture that has dominated the United States is both a positive and a negative force. The mass culture that has dominated the United States is both a positive and a negative force.
other side of this polarity, both positive and negative forces encourage cultural consolidation. Standardization of reading material has been furthered by the rise of education rates, the hegemonic impulses of mainstream leaders, the effects of large-scale capitalism on the publishing industries, and the impact of technology in shrinking distances. Consolidation has long been a theme in discussions about the uses of literacy in the twentieth century. Some commentators have portrayed it in an optimistic light. John Dewey believed that the hope of democracy lay in "our becoming one people through a popular press." More than Dewey would have wished, our sense of common identity has been forged as much by Dick Tracy and Dear Abby as by the Federalist papers or our knowledge of foreign trade. Still, to the extent that we have become "one nation," it has been partly through our shared exposure to the images, heroes, and values of popular print forms and, more recently, of the electronic media. At the same time, printed matter has been crucial in maintaining subcultures and asserting alternatives. Political and religious activists have recognized this, they place great emphasis on their publications. Defenders of the dominant culture have always known it, too; they have often tried to suppress or control dangerous diversity in print. Along with the kinds of diversity that pluralists admire, our definition also encompasses diversity caused by prejudice. One cost of a free press in a diverse society is that print can be enlisted in the service of intolerance and insularity. As we saw in the discussion of gender and magazines in chapter 9, distinct reading publics can be based on stereotypes and fostered for exploitation. Cultural distinctiveness is not always defined by the group that is affected.

Many analysts, however, emphasize the positive virtues of diversity in print and see consolidation as a threat to both quality of literature and freedom of thought. They see the tension between diversity and standardization as a war between democracy and capitalism. As we saw in chapter 2, Raymond Williams argued that the expansion of democracy led to the expansion of popular reading materials, whereas capitalism caused cultural products to be more expensive and exploitative. Short of a fundamental shift to socialism, he was not very optimistic. He called the expansion of culture the "long revolution," and for Williams it was not only incomplete but also headed to no good end. Harold Innis, also discussed in chapter 2, was more of a technological determinist. He saw history as a long one-directional process of consolidation. The problem for him lay not so much with capitalism as with the mass media and their association with standardization, nationalism, and amorality. For both Innis and

Williams, mass commercial culture worried against diversity, localization, and participation. Writing in the 1950s, both saw the previous century as a dreary march toward the national, the corporate, the superficial, and the technical. The problem for both was how to reverse what seemed like a unidirectional march toward the national, the corporate, the superficial, and the technical. The problem for both was how to reverse what seemed like a unidirectional march toward the national, the corporate, the superficial, and the technical. The problem for both was how to reverse what seemed like a unidirectional march toward the national, the corporate, the superficial, and the technical.

In any case, both saw the 1950s as the high mark of mass culture. But whereas Innis and Williams contrasted mass commercial culture with indigenous participatory culture, an assertion of American critics in the 1950s contrasted mass culture with high culture. These critics were concerned not only with standardization but also with the quality of mass culture; though they came from a variety of political perspectives, they agreed that "massification" produced trash and threatened to destroy the traditions of high culture, whose texts they considered elegant, thoughtful, and unpatterned. Since the 1950s there have been many critiques of the standardization of popular media and of capitalism's role in that standardization. Some argue that the two are inseparable, that capitalism has fostered the homogenization of print culture because cultural production in a capitalist system aims for a safe, standardized product. According to this argument, cultural production, like all other capitalist production, seeks large-scale operations and ideological stability. It thus shuns ethnic and political diversity, aiming instead to exploit as many readers as possible on behalf of commercial values. These analyses set forth three major criticisms—homogenization, the deterioration of quality, and exploitation. Although these processes cannot be wholly disentangled, this chapter focuses largely on the major of standardization, or cultural consolidation.

The terms in this inquiry are loaded. "Diversity" and "pluralism" sound good, but "fragmentation" and "disenfranchisement" do not. "Cohesion" and "unity" sound desirable, "conformity" and "standardization" sound brutal.


One can try to balance consolidation and diversity by subscribing to a cultural ideal of healthy diversity within a set of shared values and knowledge. However, actual trends in cultural production are governed not by ideals, but by technology, the profit motive, legal and political constraints, education levels, and other factors.

It often seems that standardization and assimilation are aligned on one side, with diversity and dissent on the other. Standardized reading material leans toward maintaining the status quo and assimilating people to a mainstream culture. Conversely, cultural diversity in print is aligned with choice, challenge, and individual self-growth. But America's history is, in reality, a tangle of subcultures and myriad patterns of cultural self-definition. For Mary Antin, the enthusiastic assimilationist discussed in chapter 8, self-growth led her away from her family's culture to conform ardently to mainstream values. Conversely, immigrant and religious subcultures, in the very process of conserving their own values and traditions and urging their children to do the same, have contributed to diversity and dissent within the larger society. The polarities don't line up because the cultures of family, ethnic group, school, and workplace often don't; each individual's cultural identity is acquired by reconciling or choosing among these cultures, as we discussed at length in chapter 8. Literacy can expand the thoughtfulness of such choices, not only on the side of dissent but also on the side of tradition. Much assimilation, of course, takes place not through thought and choice but through habituation and conformity. Literacy can serve these functions too.

Cultural consolidation is often associated with popular literature, such as formula fiction and mass-circulation magazines, in part because critics, whether besieged defenders of high culture or proponents of the capitalist system, worry about the threat from commercial mass culture. However, their critiques overlook a second front of cultural consolidation in the history of American literacy, the curriculum of the schools. The schools' version of the consolidation process has involved high culture, not popular culture. Schools have long taught and supported a watered-down or introductory version of high culture. As larger numbers of students spent more years in school, larger numbers of people were exposed to the canon of great writers, to landmark political documents, and to other aspects of Anglo-American high culture. Literacies contributed to this effort, and they too expanded rapidly in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. One of the most persistent and pervasive arguments among librarians has been whether this high-culture function should be paramount, or whether libraries should provide more of the popular literature people seem to want. In schools, the priority of high culture is more secure, although critics have complained that the traditional content has eroded in recent decades and that basal readers should...

contain more good literature and less pulpum concocted to appeal to children. Still, a far greater percentage of our population was exposed to a smattering of high culture in 1980 than in 1880, because a far greater percentage reached high school.

The schools' role as purveyors of sketchy high culture serves at least three functions. First, educators believe that literature and the arts provide students with substantive benefits: enlightenment, critical thinking, aesthetic uplift, and good character. In the late nineteenth century, for example, the literary focus of the language-arts programs of public schools was justified by its capacity to impart morality. Second, knowledge of high culture can act as a cultural capital with real mobility value. Some students absorb enough knowledge of high culture in school classes and in related extracurricular activities to have an impact on their careers. Paul DiMaggio has demonstrated that cultural capital (measured by self-reported involvement in literature and the fine arts) correlates with school grades and with the selection of highly educated marital partners, even when controlling for the family background and measured academic ability of the students. Third, the schools serve to legitimize high culture as a badge of superiority without destroying the exclusiveness of the group that possesses it, because the schools advocate the superiority of high culture without teaching most people very much about it. This is a necessary condition of high culture as cultural capital: it must be both restricted and recognized. Like professionals, who must maintain the difficult balance between monopolizing their expertise and informing the public about their skills enough to engender its respect, possessors of high culture would derive no status benefit if no one knew about it. As DiMaggio has noted, "particularly in the case of a dominant status group, it is important that their culture be recognized as legitimate by, yet be only partially available to, groups that are subordinate to them."9

There are, then, two aspects of the consolidation process, both of which are complicated. On the high-culture side, the very value of the exclusiveness of an elite culture depends upon a wide recognition of its

legitimacy. Widespread dissemination of a standard high culture at a superficial level thus goes hand in hand with the restriction of sophisticated education in high culture. In the realm of popular culture, capitalism clearly fosters standardization through commodification, syndication, centralization, and formulas, but it also promotes, serves, and exploits a dizzying array of diverse interests in our affluent society, some of which are based on topical and incidental identities like hobbies, whereas others are based on ideological and fundamental identities like race and gender. The historical task is to sort out these processes over time and to connect trends in publishing with trends in the broader society.

Readers in 1880

We return again to our starting point of 1880, when the country was broadly, if not highly, literate. School attendance levels were high. Among whites ages five to nineteen, 62 percent reported attending school for some time in the previous year. Local studies suggest that school enrollment clusters in the age range from eight to twelve; school enrollment among this age group was very high among all social classes. School leaving by older children was heavily correlated with ethnicity and parental occupation. One result of this system of widespread but brief education was the demographic diversity that characterized the white literate. Self-reported literacy rates were somewhat lower for the foreign born (about 88 percent) and much lower for black Americans (less than 40 percent). Schooling was less prevalent in the South for both blacks and whites, but elsewhere white Americans had achieved high rates of rudimentary literacy, and the literacy rate for black Americans was climbing rapidly.10 The implications of these statistics for adult reading are hard to determine. Only a small portion of people (fewer than 5 percent) graduated from high school, and the book-reading public was probably drawn largely from this small pool. Although newspapers had become less expensive during the nineteenth century, cheap popular magazines and the popular tabloid newspapers were still the stuff of the future, a second of the “reading revolution” to come in the 1890s.

Still, print matter was more important in some ways in 1880 than it is today, because travel was less common and there were no electronic media. Americans were also more connected to their communities, characterized by deeply embedded ethnic communities. North and South were divided; the races lived apart; labor and management seemed on the verge of a new kind of civil war. Into these diverse communities, knowledge about faraway events and ideas was introduced through newspapers and magazines. If you were a German factory worker in Chicago, and if you developed a critical perspective on work and politics—from your own experience and analysis, from friends, from family or group political traditions—you might decide to read the daily socialist newspaper, Arbeiter Zeitung. This would in turn help shape your view of capitalism and of news more generally. If you worked with people who were not readers of Arbeiter Zeitung, you might become a transmitter of the information and values that impressed you in that paper. Similarly, if you were a struggling, disgruntled farmer in Ohio, and your view of world events came from the weekly Grunge Bulletin published in Cincinnati, this might have a central influence on how you interpreted forces beyond your neighborhood that mattered to you. If you were an affluent and highly educated Episcopalian, you might choose the North American Review, which would reinforce many of your views and inform you of world affairs. Although there was not as much printed matter in the 1880s as later, and not as much topical variety, there were nonetheless different sources of news and opinion, and they played a central role in the transmission of ideas.

Reading helped to create various communities that stretched beyond geographic locale. People of the same religion, the same trade, or the same ethnic group reinforced shared identities by reading generalized newspapers and journals. Various subcultures had emerged within the reading public. There were highly educated people who chose the genteel culture in Harper’s Weekly and Scribner’s Monthly, there were enough rural readers to keep four farm journals, and there were many readers of the popular press and dime novels. And these reading habits were not limited to the ranks of the literate but were widespread and shared by many Americans.

During the century between the 1880s and the 1980s, some forces led toward greater diversity of publications, whereas others fostered greater homogenization. The analytical task here is to explore how the mix of these simultaneous processes changed over the decades and whether, on balance, the history of popular print matter in America is well described as an inexorable march toward consolidation. This chapter asserts the following generalizations about the past century’s developments in American publishing: First, from the 1880s to the 1920s, contrary trends operated, leading toward diversity in the 1890s and 1900s, and tipping toward standardization increasingly after 1900. Second, from the 1920s to the 1950s, the forces for standardization predominated, leading to the zenith in the print media’s portrayal of a bland, homogeneous American culture. Third, in the 1960s and 1970s, various factors produced a new blend of diversity within a widely shared media culture. In spite of the
simplifying terminology of standardization and diversification, how-
ever, what happened in the 1960s and 1970s was not a return to a pre-1929 diversity. It was a new blend of centrifugal and centripetal forces, a new version of diversification within some irreversible interde-
pendence and widely shared communication. It is an intriguing puzzle, this recent history, which raises important questions about one-directional accounts of the history of print culture.

The 1880s to the 1920s

After 1880, publications became cheaper and more diverse. Some also became more shrill in their political views, for it was a time of economic depression, heavy immigration, and labor-management war-
fare. Cultural elites worried about all this diversity. Was American so-
ciety coming apart? Historians like to say that the period from the 1880s to the 1920s was characterized by a "search for order."
The increase in immigration, largely from southern and eastern Europe, prompted cries for immigration restriction and Americanization. The newspeople ar-
ived just in time for the explosion of new print matter. Newspapers were using rotary presses, appealing to broader audiences, and generating bigger advertising revenues. This drove down the price and provided more range—from the staid old New York Times, to new sensationalist urban papers like Joseph Pulitzer's New York World, to country papers like the Petras Gazette.

A "magazine revolution" began in the mid-1890s, and by the turn of the century, ten-cent magazines accounted for more than 80 percent of all magazines purchased. Men in leather chairs in clubs worried about the quality of the new, cheap magazines. One defender of Harper's and Scribner's wrote that the older magazines had "the only audience worth addressing, for it contains the thinking people." But S.S. McClure, one of the most successful of the new editors, told Lincoln Steffens, "My mind and my taste are so common that I'm the best editor." Among the lead-
ing magazines were two emerging types: pictorials and, as we saw in chapter 9, women's magazines. The Ladies' Home Journal cracked the million-circulation barrier in 1860. By 1920 it was joined by fourteen other magazines with over a million in paid circulation. Religious peri-
dicals and Sunday-school papers rivaled the big-selling secular maga-
azines.

The number of foreign-language newspapers increased every year from 1885 (when there were 522 foreign-language papers) until 1913 (when there were 1,323). The immigrant press was simultaneously a force for diversity and a force for cultural consolidation. The profusion of foreign languages and foreign news dramatized American ethnic diver-
sity, and its appeal to the working class made the immigrant press a potential forum for labor ideas and politically radical perspectives. In other ways, however, the immigrant press was a conservative and homogenizing force. Most papers promoted citizenship, evolved toward English-language publication, instructed their readers about American institutions, and encouraged American consumerism through paid ad-
vertising. If the period from 1880 to 1900 was the golden age of the foreign-language press, the period from 1900 to 1920 was the period of its rapid domestication.

Not all newspapers were assimilated to the mainstream, however. The radical press thrived until World War I. In 1912, there were more than three hundred socialist periodicals, including thirteen daily socialist pa-
pers. The labor press also expanded. From broadsides urging job ac-
tions to monthly craft journals like the Locomotive Engineer and Locomotive Makers, labor activists depended on the printed word to express their point of view at a time of increasing class tensions and hard economic times. Book production was much more limited than that of magazines and newspapers, but even there we can see tendencies toward consolidation and expansion of the reading public as we have come to be.


the books" in hardbound editions.17 The expansion of the cheap book series into contemporary fiction was encouraged by the lack of an international copyright law. Indeed, publishers of the inexpensive series became leading opponents of a proposed copyright law. The classics would not be affected, but the economic fate of these publishers depended on pirated editions of new works. In addition to Scott, Dickens, and Eliot, countless English mystery writers were also in paperback at Everside, Appleton, and other venturesome publishers. In 1886 twenty-six such series issued 1,551 titles.18

In spite of a copyright law passed in 1891, supported by the more prestigious publishers, who opposed the cheap paper editions, by American authors, whose works were too expensive compared with pirated English fiction, and by American type-setters, after Congress included a clause requiring writers be paid in paper editions as they were in the United States. The copyright law led to a new emphasis on American authors and to a new diversity in the book market as a whole. In this burst of activity, some writers expressed critical attitudes about society, foreshadowing Theodore Dreiser, Hart Crane, American realism, and muckraking journalism.19

Meanwhile, some conservatives feared not just political dissent in print but the fragmentation of knowledge among educated people. Could the very best writings in American culture unify an expanding body of readers? There was a threefold increase in the number of books published between 1880 and 1900, and there were more high-school and college graduates to read them. But these new readers had to choose among a confusing array of publications, and consensus about what was "best" was eroding with the onset of literary modernism. An insistent demand for information and expertise accompanied the expansion of the press in the early decades of the twentieth century, and it threatened the hegemony of liberal culture.20

In spite of these worries about splintering in the reading public, there were some underlying forces of standardization. Affecting not only the publishing industries but also the entire society was the modern national-level corporation, which became the dominant business organization in America by World War I. Competition in the mass market created a new culture of advertising and consumerism. The brand names, the products, and the advertisements all became part of American culture. Big national corporations gave us Campbell soups and Diamond

matches, but big-scale enterprise also affected the way the publishing industry itself operated.21

Newspaper content became more standard with the arrival of the national wire services and syndicated features; notions of an "objective" stance and a standard style gained ground as reporters found themselves producing stories that would run simultaneously in newspapers across the country. By the 1890s the Associated Press was joined by the United Press and other news services. Comics began in 1896 with the "Yellow Kid," followed by "The Katzenjammer Kids" the next year. In the 1890s the Hearst news service was distributing travel columns, Sunday magazine articles, and columns like Mr. Dooley. People around the country thus increasingly were reading the same materials.22

The period from the 1880s to the 1920s, then, witnessed both diversification and standardization of published reading, with diversity predominating before 1900, and standardization gaining. Between the 1920s and the 1950s the forces for consolidation went into high gear.

The 1920s to the 1950s

As the period opened, heightened concern about political radicals and foreign influences was dramatized in the Red Scare. The wartime drive for unity and the fear of subversion had spawned massive government propaganda and the suppression of dissenting publications. It did not simply dissipate after the war, but created harsher pressures for conformity and assimilation.23 In addition, Congress restricted immigration; with fewer and fewer first-generation immigrants in the population, immigrant newspapers tended to fold or Americanize. Education levels rose; as increasing numbers of people attended and completed high school, the potential book-reading public expanded. Whereas only 32 percent of fourteen- to twenty-year-olds were in school in 1920, by 1950 more than 77 percent were.24 Newspapers expanded an increasing


number of readers to comics, sports, and national events, while radio and the movies created other popular heroes. 

The number of cities with competing daily newspapers dropped dramatically. The total number of newspapers thus was declining at the same time that circulation was increasing. Chains controlled more and more papers—in 1910, 10 percent, and by 1935, 40 percent. All papers carried less local news and more syndicated features. After traveling around the country in 1930, Oswald Villard, editor of the Nation, observed that "one finds the same comics, the same Sunday magazines, the same special features in almost all of [the papers], and, of course, in most of them precisely the same Associated Press news." Publishers had to consolidate so they could afford expensive typesetting machines and presses. Although more and more people were reading newspapers, the newspapers they were reading were more and more alike.

Magazines experienced a similar evolution. They were driven by the need for advertising revenue, and they reflected the cultural pressures for conformity that characterized American life. The number of periodicals declined slightly between 1930 and 1958, even though the population and the reading public increased. The big leaders got the big circulations and the big advertising accounts. By 1920, Curtis, publisher of the Ladies' Home Journal, the Saturday Evening Post, and Country Gentleman, already had 40 percent of all advertising dollars, and Cowell, with Collier's and the Women's Home Companion, had another 12 percent. Some critics emphasize that the dependence on advertising inhibited the publication of views critical of the capitalist system. Whatever the effect of such self-censorship, advertising had two additional impacts: it increased the number of readers who read the same best-selling magazines, and it provided some of America's popular culture through the advertising copy itself. From Maine to New Mexico, readers of popular magazines knew that "L.S.M.F.T." was the abbreviation for "Lucky Strike Means Fine Tobacco."

By 1950 annual growth in magazine circulation was greatly outstripping population growth. Back in 1880, no magazine circulation had equaled 1 percent of the United States population. By 1920, eight magazines had circulations greater than 1 percent of the population; by 1950, twenty-four did. By then the leading magazines in America were mostly like each other, and they were found in most middle-class homes.

Life, Look, Collier's, and the Saturday Evening Post helped to set the agenda of public issues and social reform. The Ladies' Home Journal, Women's Home Companion, McCall's, and Woman's Day catered to middle-class women's interests. Reader's Digest and Time presented busy people with a ready selection of news and views. Books did not follow this pattern as closely, but there were efforts at standardization; examples include the creation of the Literary Guild and the Book-of-the-Month Club in the 1920s, which resulted in the large-scale distribution of standardized book lists. A different form of standardization of book reading took place through the schools. As more people went to high school and as the canon of literary works taught became standardized, more American teenagers were introduced to the same books at the same time. Meanwhile, the range of content in printed publications narrowed somewhat, even as the total amount of publication increased. The foreign-language press declined after 1920. The press of the populists, socialists, anarchists, and other radicals fragmented, failed, or moved underground. The Hispanic press was waning by the 1950s, and in 1964 a sociologist predicted, "it is probable that in 15 years the Spanish-language press will virtually have died out." He was incorrect, but his projection reflected the trends of his day.

Censorship or subtle self-censorship probably was no worse in 1950 than in 1890, but it should be mentioned as a constraint on diversity, preventing books from straying along paths deemed immoral or politically dangerous. In Purity in Print, Paul Boyer emphasized that our society has generally resisted blatant censorship crusades like those of the antivice societies of the 1920s; nonetheless, censorship efforts combined with marketing factors to produce some chilling effect. In the 1950s, "manuscripts were nervously evaluated in the light of Depression tastes," wrote Boyer. "In a time of financial stringency, the mass distribution of broadly popular books became the goal. . . . The mass-market standards of the book clubs continued subtly to influence the editorial judgments of publishers with an eye on this lucrative source of sales." The movie industry concurrently and voluntarily supported efforts to revive confidence in and loyalty to traditional American values, and in

27. Ibid., 64-65.
31. Ibid.
32. On the literary canon in American high schools, see Appleby, Tradition and Reform in the Teaching of English, chap. 5.

Standardization and Diversity / 285
the postwar anti-Communist days rooted out dissenters and dissent with a vengeance.35

By the early 1950s the artifacts of American popular culture had achieved cultural homogenization. Radios reached everybody, newspapers were heavily consolidated, and the leading magazines were similar in content and appearance and devoted to selling the same products. War and McCarthyism had dampened political dissent, movies followed safe formulas, and the foreign-language press was a mere shadow of what it had been. The organization man was a central cultural image; homemaking for women was a value promoted throughout the world of print. Big labor had become respectable and unions were organized; they bargained by agreed-upon rules.

Of course, dissent and diversity still existed. Many Americans remained excluded from power and privilege, and many expressed their dissent. But one wouldn't find it in the reading materials that faced most readers each day. Technology, capitalism, politics, and education had combined to homogenize the world of print as never before. The society was not really homogeneous, but print culture was, to an unprecedented degree.

The 1950s to the 1980s

Who was waiting in the wings? Herbert Marcuse, C. Wright Mills, Norman Mailer, Martin Luther King, and Gloria Steinem. Said Mills: "Let the old women complain wisely about 'the end of ideology.' We are beginning to move in another direction, a conformist mainstream culture of the 1950s was under assault. From the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s American public life bristled with diversity—youth rebellion, an exploding civil rights movement, a white ethnic revival, the black empowerment, increased immigration, Asian and Hispanic groups, and a revival of fundamentalist Protestantism. All of these diverse forces had an impact on reading in America. Technological and marketing factors reinforced these divergent tendencies. The paperback revolution provided drugstores and newsstands with titles on all sorts of topics, both wide-ranging and controversial. The general-interest magazine gave way to magazines targeted at more specific groups. The television had captured the advertising dollars for general audiences. For the market went something like this: the audience the 1950s and 1970s, producing both topical and ideological diversity.

There was a revival of the foreign-language press in general, and of the Hispanic press in particular. The number of English-language publications remained stable, prompting J. Fishman to conclude that "contrary to 'populism,' the ethnic mother-tongue press in the U.S. constitutes a vigorous institutional field of activity."27 The rise of the Spanish-language press was spectacular, from 49 publications in 1960 (with a circulation of about 500,000) to 165 publications in 1980 (with a circulation of more than 2.5 million).28

The religious press also thrived in this period, particularly among fundamentalist and evangelical Protestants. Although rooted in the 1920s and 1930s, the fundamentalist press grew slowly, even after the founding of the Christian Booksellers Association in 1950. In the 1970s, however, fundamentalist and evangelical publishing swarmed: the number of bookstores affiliated with the Christian Booksellers Association increased from 1,000 to 2,400 between 1971 and 1978. The publishing activities of this religious subculture were immense and largely invisible to the mainstream press. In 1982 Francis Schaeffer's Christian Manifesto was outselling Jane Fonda's Workout Book by a two-to-one margin, yet the Workout Book was the New York Times number one best seller, and Schaeffer's book wasn't even on the list.29 The radical press also revived and expanded in the late 1960s, solidifying dissent and reinforcing doubts about American mainstream institutions. Although many countercultural publications had failed or been commercialized by the late 1970s, in its heyday the "underground press" counted perhaps two million readers, and there was a sense of tremendous diversity, questioning, and innovation in these publications.


tions. A new feminist press subsequently emerged, and it has endured. Ms. magazine and the academic journal Signs were only two examples of a widespread movement that created hundreds of books, journals, publishing units, and bookstores. The gay press, tiny and insecure before the 1960s, also expanded. One, the Mattachine Review, and the Ladder began in the 1950s. In 1958 One was protected from obscenity charges by the Supreme Court, and in the 1960s and 1970s gay publications increased exponentially, contributing to gay liberation activities in the 1970s and to the development of a strong gay subculture. Black-owned book publishing experienced a dramatic rise after 1960. Increased economic stability among African Americans and greater black-scale organization of formal economic activity produced incentives for increased self-employment. Black-owned print media, especially newspapers, magazines, and other information media, grew rapidly in the 1960s and 1970s. Black magazines grew in number and increased in circulation, and newspapers expanded their coverage of black life.

Capital-intensive as a technological innovation; people can (and do) produce commercially viable books in their basements. The small press phenomenon is an interesting counterpoint to the consolidating trends of bookstore franchising and formula-romance production, and it tells us something about the relationship of technology to the diversity of print culture. Rotary letterpress printing may have led initially to diversity of newspaper style and content, as the reading public expanded and editors like Pulitzer and Hearst shaped new popular daily titles; but in the long run, letterpress technology required large-scale organization and capital and thus contributed to the drift toward consolidated canvas, rising racial pride, and expanded civil rights activity combined to encourage "the most rapid proliferation of new black book publishers in the century." The output of titles by black-owned publishers increased between 1950 and 1965 to more than 165 between 1970 and 1974. The relationship of the black press to cultural consolidation and cultural diversity is complicated. In some ways the development of the black press fits the patterns outlined above: starting from the limited-circulation special-interest publications of the 1880 to 1920 period, black publishing shared the trend toward consolidation, with the advent of national advertising, newspaper chains like the Scott World papers, and general-interest magazines like Ebony. Furthermore, many black publishers acquired in a homogenizing middle-class consumer stereotype. But in the 1960s and 1970s black publishing took off, due to the same interaction of technology and marketing with political and cultural activism that fueled the publications of other groups. In spite of these similarities, the black press remained consistently diverse; some publications were more radically separatist, some more assimilationist, and-as with the immigrant press—a single publication could serve both purposes simultaneously. Small-press publishing in general soared in the 1960s and 1970s.

Offset printing and entrepreneur-shipping created such publishing sensibilities as The Whole Earth Catalog. In 1958, 1,000 publishers issued 13,500 titles; by 1965, 1,000 publishers issued 50,000 titles; and 10,000 publishers issued 135,000 titles. In 1970, 12,000 publishers issued 100,000 titles; and by 1974, 12,000 publishers issued 200,000 titles. Small publishers used personal and household-scale equipment, and large publishers continued to use most of the technology of the 1950s. Some features of American reading materials were very sturdy. Consumerism, patriotism, the comic strips, professional athletics, advertisements that appealed to sexual stereotypes, newspapers that focused on sensational crime— all of these characterized our reading material in the 1960s. 15,000 publishers, most of them issuing fewer than 5 titles each, issued 50,000 new titles. Offset printing is less

41. Fox-Genovese, "New Female Literary Culture."
44. Ibid., 147.

Standardization and Diversity / 289
yond the publishing industries many processes of consolidation in American life continued. Education levels continued in a convergent direction in the 1960s and early 1970s. Inexpensive travel and the ubiquitous presence of the electronic media continued, as did the concentration of newspaper ownership. The paperback industry moved from diversity toward an emphasis on the blockbuster best-seller, and a large share of other paperback sales were in formula romances. Most Americans of the 1980s were plugged into the same electronic news, the same big-network entertainment, and the same fast-food franchises.

Still, the print world was more diverse in 1985 than in 1955. One needed only to compare Mr. with Penthouse to appreciate how diverse some of our leading publications had become. The experiences of the 1960s and 1970s suggest that capitalism and the technology of modern publishing do not always imply standardization and homogeneity of the printed word. Although the powerful forces of consolidation properly give rise to concern about the quality and diversity of print publication in the future, there has thus far always been a turn toward standardization of the printed word, to which the heroes of the civil rights movement have come. While the heroes of the American Revolution, feminist classics along with the traditional standards works, black and Hispanic poets along with Anglo poets, although the ideal has not been fully realized, it is an ideal worth having as a guide when fighting the blandness of basal readers and situating comedies, when combating with frustrated advocates of Anglo conformity and back-to-the-future curriculum, or when pondering the delicate issues of government support and regulation of cultural production.

Epilogue

Even if this ideal of healthy diversity and a shared pluralistic culture were to be accepted by all Americans, an optimistic vision of the future is impossible if higher levels of literacy do not become more widespread. A common culture cannot be shared if the literacy abilities needed to understand and enjoy it are not shared. The history of American literacy is a story of narrow reading populations; but recent literacy assessments have made us painfully aware that literacy abilities vary dramatically across racial, ethnic, and income groups. We must not tolerate this kind of diversity. The fundamental threat posed by America's literacy problems today is not that the Japanese beat us at math tests and computer chips, but that democracy will wane in the twenty-first century.

As we saw in chapter 3, alarming gaps exist between the basic literacy skills of different groups defined on the basis of race, ethnicity, or income. At higher levels of literacy, the problems become pervasive across all social groups. We are at a historic moment in the 1990s, analogous to the 1920s in some ways but at a higher literacy level. In the 1920s, just when
thought they had achieved some control over rudimentary literacy rates by limiting immigration and improving the reach of public schooling, testing experts began to warn that among the nominally literate were far too many who could not use their literacy. The army’s entrance tests displayed shocking gaps between the races, gaps that were heavily discussed during the 1920s. And when the 1930 census reported low outright-illiterate figures, the reading expert William Gray reminded educators that there were millions “who have learned to engage in the very simplest reading and writing activities but have not attained functioning literacy.” 48

Today it appears again that the viability of democratic politics and the productivity of our economic system depend on a further escalation of our literacy expectations. Reports that deskilled jobs are increasing must not distract us from the abundant evidence that overall literacy requirements are increasing in the workplace. Reports that most people get their news from television must not overshadow the fact that if people are to be empowered, they require critical reading and writing skills.

Higher-level critical literacy abilities for all children must become a central goal of schools. Other public policies must complement the literacy work of the schools, for they cannot do it alone. History tells us that oppressed groups in America have focused on literacy as a critical tool and as an entry into the mainstream. They have acquired literacy skills through a combination of formal public institutions, such mediating institutions as clubs and churches, and the family. The recent study of literacy by the National Assessment of Educational Progress reinforced the notion that schools cannot do the job alone. In that assessment the reading abilities of young adults correlated with a wide variety of family factors—not just race, family income, and their parents’ educational level, but also the number of publications that entered the home and how often the youths read them. 49

The implications of this finding for public policy are problematic. It is easier to affect formal institutions through public policy than it is to influence the family. There are, nonetheless, both direct and indirect ways in which government can affect the literacy potential of families. We can spend more money on adult literacy agencies, and we can focus it in different ways, for example, toward parents whose own literacy abilities are inadequate and who want to help their children read better. Other direct policies include high-quality day-care centers and income support for the mothers of young children. While implementing these policies, governments can bolster mediating institutions and push literacy to a higher place on their agendas. Adult literacy training can be done in collaboration with day care, or in libraries, or by “storefront” neighborhood organizations. Policies indirectly related to literacy are equally necessary and even more difficult. Because motivation for learning is as important as a family’s resources, we must try to remove motivational obstacles to learning. We must fight discrimination, drugs, unemployment, and low wages. We must work toward a fair society, in which there will be ample opportunity for all to use their literacy abilities in meaningful ways.

The ideal of a diverse but inclusive literacy requires effort on both sides of the equation—we need both a lively diversity of accessible reading materials and a highly literate population. The first condition seems to ebb and flow, but it is in tension with the long-run trend toward consolidation in the publishing industries and has not been the focus of much public policy or debate. Considering the free-speech guarantees of our Constitution and the capacity of various technologies to serve diversity as well as standardization, it might seem that the capacity for diverse printed expression will always be with us and is not in need of further guarantees. But considering the powerful effect of the profit motive of marketing, and of organizational structure in the publishing industries, such a laissez-faire attitude is dangerous. In the absence of imaginative policies that will protect and foster diverse access to print, corporate policies, corporate priorities, and corporate organization threaten important avenues of expression in our society. Because the erosion is generally gradual and insidious to most citizens, most policy makers do not become aroused. We hope that historical awareness will lead readers to think about the need to protect diversity in print.

To achieve the second requisite—the general diffusion of high-level literacy skills—we must mobilize schools, families, and other institutions in a new coalition of literacy abilities. If we can do this while preserving the diversity and the broad participation that are essential to democratic life, we will have preserved and deepened the essential connection between literacy and the Republic.