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Impact of Media Technology in the 1960s Counterculture Movement

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Abstract:

The 1960s is remembered in modern society as a period of the cultural revolution, social change and activism. Many factors led to the emergence of subcultures and the development of counterculture in Western society. While aspects such as politics, economic prosperity, and expansion of population were major contributors to the cultural changes, the impact and role of the budding media technology remain an unavoidable feature. The period can be understood as witnessing, through counterculture, the much power and influence that media and communication technologies can hold in society. Through the influence of media, the 1960s showcases the pivotal role that can be played by forms of mass-media technology in the shaping of culture, politics and ideological beliefs.

Keywords: Counterculture, 1960s, television, media, culture, technology.

Movements based on ideological, cultural and political beliefs are not uncommon developments in human history. In fact, public disobedience and cultural rebellions have been the source of great progress and developmental changes. While wide-scale cultural, political and religious movements have existed for a greater part of the history of civilised society, modern technological advancement has allowed for a more impactful, immediate and wider distribution of information which can have specific outcomes at any given movement. What is known as the ‘counterculture’ era of the 1960s is still remembered and referenced in various outlets of contemporary culture for its anti-establishment sentiments and political protests by young students. The term ‘counterculture’ itself is understood as “resistance to the norm and has come to encompass everything from alternative lifestyles to large movements advocating social change” (Gillieron, 2015, p. 7). Although other factors were present, the

amplification of counterculture sentimentalities through 1960s media outlets is a key element in the study and analysis of the period.

Rise of Media Technology

The general decline and rejection of Western conservative values and the rise of dissent from different communal organisations remains distinguishing aspect of the 1960s. The rising influence of television, radio and mass media was a determining factor that led to many youth-based rebellions where the concepts of war, industrialisation and capitalism were seen as failing an entire generation. With an increase in the outward projection of wealth in Western societies after the end of World War II, media became a ubiquitous element in the rising consumer society. Following the end of World War, Andy Bennett writes:

The new demand for consumer products was met by a rapid expansion in the type of commodities available. A whole range of items from cars to electrical household appliances, such as washing machines, food mixers, electric irons, television and record players, became much more widely available than they had been before the Second World War. New techniques of mass production also meant that such items were more cheaply available than they had been before the war. (Bennett, 2001, p. 9)

By the 1960s, televisions, TV journalism, radios and record players had started to become a permanent part of the common household. The availability of such devices meant that the reception of cultural and political developments was made to reach each individual irrespective of their place and role in society as a whole. Therefore, although the emergence of the counterculture in the 1960s is regarded as a period of a distinctive revolutionary development, its uniqueness from other revolutionary eras lies in the factor that it was an era that was fuelled and defined by the influence of mass media. The period saw the powerful impact that technology can have upon the shaping of societal dynamics which may not always bear positive outcomes. Pramod K. Nayar has written regarding the influence and power held by technological progresses:

A technological shift . . . marks a cultural shift of attitudes towards skills, education and employment...Digital movies and advances in sound and technology can decide the success of cultural artefacts such as motion pictures by influencing audience preferences. Further, technologies frequently double as instruments of

surveillance and control. From highway speed cameras to state dossiers on citizens, all technologies possess an immanent ‘pervertability’. (Nayar, 2004, p. 22-23)

Culture and Political Influence of Media

This ‘pervertability’ can be seen to be exercised by to a large degree by the rising media outlets through communication devices and cultural icons. Such icons included counterculture musicians and entertainers who occupied an important place during the era as public figures. The emergence of musical artists such as The Beatles, Bob Dylan and Jimi Hendrix marked a change of cultural perspective as entertainers experimented with their artistic sensibilities, the results of which were distributed through television and radio. On the 9th of February 1964, the British rock band The Beatles made their American television debut on the *Ed Sullivan Show* which garnered “some seventy-three million television viewers, a figure that accounted for nearly forty per cent of the population of the United States at that time” (Womack, 2007, p. 80). This television appearance became a historic event in popular culture that ushered in the craze of Beatlemania into the United States. Members of the band, who advocated experimentation not only in their music and drugs but also in religious and ideological outlook, soon, became leading figures of the psychedelic counterculture scene and the group continued to top music charts all over the world. Peter Braunstein writes, “The British Invasion, officially launched by the Beatles’ takeover of the pop charts (and their subsequent U.S tour) in January 1964, brought Mod culture to America” (Braunstein, 2002, p. 245). Other musical acts were also hugely impactful in influencing the public and providing them with new musical experiences; songs like ‘Blowin’ in the Wind’ by Bob Dylan “were known by protestors around the world and provided musicscape for the expression of dissent during protest marches in numerous countries” (Kutschke, 2015, p. 3). The media’s attention was hence, further focused on the music, fashion and sensibilities of young people everywhere who were evolving to be the driving force of the modern society.

Although the counterculture echoed the sentiments of the younger generation who rejected the fast-paced technology driven capitalist society of the modern world, media and communication technologies continued to contribute in ushering in the culture of rebellion into the mainstream. Television became a major political force as important events such as presidential debates were televised and brought to the households of millions. Television appearances made by U.S president John F. Kennedy greatly helped in building the image of

a young, energetic leader who was able to relate to the issues of the new post-war generation of youths and establish him as a figure who was eager to get youths involved in society. As Peter Braunstein writes, “John F. Kennedy and First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy spearheaded the youthful style and aesthetic that eventually became the zeitgeist of the decade” (Braunstein, 2022, p. 244); the presentable image of the President and the First Lady can also be considered significant milestones for the budding counterculture as the image that the pair presented was often showcased for the public through the media. As Braunstein further writes:

JFK’s good looks and charm, his dynamic cabinet and entourage (which included younger brother Bobby), and Jackie’s immediate ascension to fashion and style maven provided a vivid contrast with the staid and geriatric Eisenhower administration...JFK’s rhetorical emphasis on “the excitement of danger, the exhilaration of confrontation, and the heroism of sacrifice provided a behavioral template for his youthful admirers. (Braunstein, 2002, p. 244)

Impact of Vietnam and its Television Portrayal

While media technology and mass communication were instrumental in bringing forth the vibrant, progressive ideals of the peace-loving generation, it also contributed to violent dissents that would eventually engulf the movement of the counterculture as a whole. As technology had allowed for television journalists to provide on-location reports, viewers were given realistic glimpses into the lives of combat soldiers during the war in Vietnam. The U.S government’s involvement in the Vietnam War was one of the most impactful aspects of the decade that resulted in cultural unrest and student rebellions in college campuses. The war divided opinions amongst citizens as the events of the war were continuously made known to the public. Michael Hoenisch writes:

The war divided the nation and produced competing perspectives on the problems looming in its wake. Images of the war and of the protests against it were available on American TV and movie screen, and they travelled around the world. American TV networks, generally mainstream, covered the events in Vietnam more and more as both the military involvement and the struggles about its justification intensified. The US government itself intervened in the battle of image. As the conflict escalated, The Department of Defence produced documentaries that tried to legitimize the war. (Hoenisch, 2013, p. 175)

Anti-war emotions were shared by a majority of the public as scenes of the casualties of war were shown on television screens; for the first time, on-sight reporting brought the news of the war from the battlefield directly into the homes of the people. Sentiments of the anti-war movement were also further spread as popular counterculture musicians incorporated their condemning of war into their songs. While writing their controversial track entitled “Revolution 1” the Beatles had based their lyrics around the occurrences surrounding the Vietnam War, the protests against it, and other politically heated developments. Ian Macdonald writes:

Fanfared by the Tet Offensive, 1968 had burst violently into the floating Utopian fantasy of the previous year, thrusting Vietnam to the top of the protest agenda and sparking a pitched battle between police and 100,000 anti-war marchers outside the US embassy in Grosvenor Square. As if to drive the point home, Martin Luther King’s assassination a few weeks later confirmed a brutal *Zeitgeist* shift from love and peace to politics and struggle. In Revolution 1, Lennon was consciously addressing such issues; and in refusing to relinquish love and peace for the grim priorities of the new era, he knew he risked alienating The Beatles’ world audience of rapidly radicalising youth. (Macdonald, 2008, p. 283)

Towards the end of the 1960s, advocacy for peace and love had been overshadowed by violent clashes as the number of protestors grew alongside the increase in the number of Americans who were wounded and killed in combat. Pramod K. Nayar, in his extensive study of what he terms as “extreme cultures” has written that “the circulation of images of the pain of others is essential to a critical literacy of suffering” and that such forms of extreme cultures “offer knowledge of shared precarity as a foundational condition of humanity, so that a witness culture emerges through the cultural discourse of vulnerability” (Nayar, 2017, p. 150). Nayar posits that the insertion of the body into unfamiliar spaces and settings can become a source of thrill or sensation and that it is correlated to the human condition of vulnerability; such a situation can be identified in the heightened political atmosphere of the anti-war protest era where protestors were made aware of their helplessness against government overreach when it came to the war in Vietnam. In its identification of Western society as an essential failure, the counterculture can be considered as a form of Nayar’s extreme cultures as the media’s attention was focused extensively on the Vietnam War and in doing so, “to the fragility of life through its emphasis on breakable bodies and subjectivities”. (Nayar, 2017, p.150)

Tor Egil Fjørland is of the opinion that the response to the war in Vietnam was fuelled with so much emotion due to its coverage by the media; as he stated, “what distinguished the reaction to the Vietnam War from its pre-World War II predecessors was mainly the *number* of war resisters – and of course, the media attention” (Fjørland, 2015, p. 130). Further he has written:

The number of casualties per year in Vietnam was similar to the Korean War of 1950-53. The media coverage of the two differed, with television bringing the Vietnam War home to American citizens in a dramatically more graphic way than the war in Korea, but for the pictures to produce opposition to the system of U.S imperialism that purportedly lay behind it they had to fit into a specific and controversial frame. Decision-making structures and dormitory rules at many universities were certainly old fashioned but no more so in the 1960s than in the 1950s. And again we are confronted with the question why so many students – before and during the 1960s – refrained from protesting. (Fjørland, 2015, p. 136)

The protests against the Vietnam War can thus be seen as being a unique phenomenon mainly due to the media coverage that surrounded the event. Because of the availability of information and publicity, the countercultural sentiments were popularised worldwide which established the movement not as a form of subculture but as being part of mainstream culture. Much like other events of the 1960s counterculture, the war in Vietnam has become a defining feature of the entertainment industry. Through the showcase of the stories of war in the news and films, the narrative was able to be shifted and subsequently, so was the public’s view of the war. John Storey has written on how the Vietnam War has been portrayed in the entertainment industry:

Rather than the silence of defeat, there has been a veritable ‘incitement’ to talk about Vietnam. America’s most unpopular war has become its most popular when measured in discursive and commercial terms. Although America no longer has ‘authority over’ Vietnam, it continues to hold authority over Western accounts of America’s war in Vietnam. Hollywood as a ‘corporate institution’ deals with Vietnam ‘by making statements about it, authorising views of it, describing it, by teaching it. Hollywood has ‘invented’ Vietnam as a ‘contrasting image’ and a ‘surrogate and . . . underground self’ of America. (Storey, 2009, p. 172)

Countercultural Ideas in Mainstream Culture

Modern technology and advancement had purportedly been one of the aspects of Western society that the counterculture was rejecting. However, events born out of the counterculture such as protest music, fashion, civil rights activism and anti-war rebellion had been popularised and appropriated through mainstream media technology. In this fashion, modern media and its availability had the power and authority to influence audiences according to particular ideological or political leanings. As Storey, who is of the opinion that Hollywood's portrayal of the Vietnam War was a form of Orientalism, further writes:

In this way Hollywood – together with other discursive practices, such as songs, novels, TV serials, etc. – succeeded in producing a very powerful discourse on Vietnam; telling America and the world that what happened there, happened because Vietnam is like that. These different discourses are not just *about* Vietnam; they may increasingly *constitute* for Americans the *experience* of Vietnam. They may become the war itself. (Storey, 2009, p. 172)

Pramod K. Nayar has also stated regarding the use of advertising, music and television to stir the emotions of audiences, “An overall pattern among seemingly incompatible elements is achieved through manipulation of colour, direction of movement, editing rhythm, repetition and play of spatial figures, and the theme of mirroring/reflection” (Nayar, 2004, p. 128). Depiction of certain scenes for television viewers is therefore, not merely a means of information or awareness, rather they can become channels through which cultures and ideologies are shaped. It is also important to note that although a major portion of the counterculture activism was based on the idea of returning to nature and rejection of capitalist driven modern technology, there was a portion of the cultural uprising that knowingly embraced the changes that came along with technological advancements. Similar to how there were political leaders and cultural icons who wanted to utilise the power of the rising media to win over the new generation of peace-loving youths, there existed counter culturists who sought to re-evaluate the relationship between man, nature and technology in order that modern inventions could be utilised in favour of preservation and conservancy of the environment. Andrew Kirk writes:

These critics, who were especially influential within the New Left circles, emphasized that social and environmental problems in America stemmed not from a lack of resources but from a misguided waste of the “technology of abundance.” If the

American people could be convinced to abandon their bourgeoisie quest for consumer goods, these critics argued, then valuable resources could be redirected toward establishing social equity and ecological harmony instead of consumerism and waste. In the late 1960s post-scarcity assumptions fuelled a brief period of technology-based utopian optimism that profoundly influenced a generation of environmentalists. (Kirk, 2002, p. 355)

Capitalization of Subcultural Lifestyles

Mass media and technology is reputed to be a colonizing force that overtakes and capitalizes on the authenticity of subcultural characters. Hence, the idea – popular culture in the form of music, film, fashion, etc., is a lower form of culture as it has been popularised by the mainstream media and therefore, understood and digestible for the general public. While this notion of popular culture and its colonisation by mass media remains a common belief, the question of whether or not media publicity lessens the purpose and aim of a culture can also be posed. For example, the innovative style and authenticity of The Beatles or Bob Dylan as musical artists was not reduced after their massive climbs to success. In fact, their pioneering experimental style of psychedelic music and their impact as cultural icons continued even after the end of the ‘Swinging Sixties’. Sarah Thornton argues that there is “in fact, no opposition between subcultures and the media, except for a dogged ideological one”, she posits that there are media forces that are “integral to youth’s social and ideological formations” (Thornton, 2005, p. 383). Thornton further writes:

National mass media, such as the tabloids, develop youth movements as much as they distort them. Contrary to youth subcultural ideologies, ‘subcultures’ do not germinate from a seed and grow by force of their own energy into mysterious ‘movements’ only to be belatedly digested by the media. Rather, media and other culture industries are there and effective right from the start. (Thornton, 2005, p. 383-384)

Because of its great exposure through different media outlets, the era of the counterculture has often been criticised as many are of the opinion that it was not a revolutionary cultural awakening but rather a passing fad that came to an end as quickly as it came into prominence. Many were also discouraged by the close coalition between the counterculture and the policies of the New Left towards the end of the decade. The encouragement of violence during anti-war and civil rights protests were also disavowed by many who did not wish to take the forceful route during such times of turbulent political

climate. As the counterculture became more and more political in its path, the role of media and its distribution and distortion of news became more instrumental and vital. As Thornton has again noted:

The underground espouses a fashion system that is highly relative; it is all about position, context and timing. Its subcultural capitals have built-in obsolescence so that it can maintain its status not only as the prerogative of the young, but the 'hip'. This is why the media are crucial; they are the main disseminators of these fleeting capitals. They are not simply another symbolic good or indicator of distinction, but a series of institutional networks essential to the creation, classification and distribution of cultural knowledge. (Thornton, 2005, p. 384)

By the year 1968, the narrative of the counterculture and its political ideologies had been largely established as hegemonic in Western culture; promiscuous sexual activities, use of hallucinogenic drugs and avant-garde forms of expressions were no longer seen as alien or unusual amongst common members of society. Because of the legitimacy attained by the counterculture through the media, academia and advocacy by public figures, its ideology came to be embedded into the mechanism of the capitalist society. The counterculture was not denied expression in different cultural outlets; rather, subcultural lifestyles of the counterculture were amplified by the media through the news, music, film and politics.

Legacy of the Counterculture

While it would not be fair to attribute the cultural changes and uprising of the 1960s to a single factor, it remains an important detail that there were certain social and demographic conditions that provided such opportunities of cultural and political dissent to take place, and the rising media technology of the time was one such condition. It can, therefore, be argued that the answer for the cultural revolution of the 1960s is to be found in the increase of protest opportunities that were being provided for young people. The ground for protest had been established by the baby boom after the Second World War when the economic expansion of the Western industrial society was taking place. There needed to be a means of mobilization that would carry the movement into a unified whole which can be found in the presence of media technology that reached audiences worldwide.

The era of the counterculture during the 1960s was indeed a period where the presence and impact of media and its outlet were truly witnessed and felt amongst the general

masses. As media technology provided information and knowledge to spread news, trends and propaganda alike, it was a significant time in Western cultural history as common men and women were able and allowed to participate and be active in the changes. As technological means of communication continue to evolve, the presence of media is continued to be felt in the contemporary context. As seen from the pivotal role played by media during the period of the counterculture, the mass influence and impact of media technology is one factor that need not be overlooked while looking into the formation of cultural and political establishments and their ideological standings.

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