

Man and Media

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Public Lecture

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My topic is “Man and Media,” a topic which relates to an aspect of media on which I have been working a good deal lately. The preface to a new book of mine begins, “All of man’s artifacts, of language, of laws, of ideas, hypotheses, tools, clothing computers – all of these are extensions of our physical bodies.” This power to extend ourselves was used as a theme by Hans Haas in his book *The Human Animal*. In it he considers this human ability to create additional organs as an enormity from the evolutionary standpoint – an advance laden with unfathomable consequences. My new book on the laws of the media will contain observations on the operation and effects of human artifacts on man and society, or, as Haas notes, “a human artifact is not merely an implement for working upon something but an extension of our body effected by artificial additional organs to which, to a greater or lesser degree, we owe our civilization.”

Something overlooked by Haas is the absence of biological or psychological means of coping with the effects of our own technical ingenuity in creating new organs. The problem is clearly indicated by Albert Simeons in *Man’s Presumptuous Brain*, in which he says that about a half million years ago, when man began slowly to embark upon the road to cultural advance, an entirely new situation arose. The use of instruments and the control of fire introduced artifacts in which the cortex could avail itself for purposes of living. These artifacts had no relationship whatever to the organization of the body and could, therefore, not be integrated into the functioning of the brain-stem.

What Simeons is saying is that our natural responses to media and to technology are irrelevant, that we cannot trust our instincts or our natural physical responses to new things. They will destroy us. How are we to bypass or offset merely physical response to new technology and new environments created by new technologies?

This problem has not been raised by anybody, even though we have to live with it every day. Edgar Allan Poe’s story “The Descent into the Maelstrom” had tremendous influ-

ence on nineteenth-century poets and symbolists such as Baudelaire, Flaubert, and others. In this story, Poe imagines the situation in which a sailor, who has gone out on a fishing expedition, finds himself caught in a huge maelstrom or whirlpool. He sees that his boat will be sucked down into this thing. He begins to study the action of the maelstrom and observes that some things disappear and some things reappear. By studying those things that reappear and attaching himself to one of them, he saves himself. Pattern recognition in the midst of a huge, overwhelming, destructive force is the way out of the maelstrom. The huge vortices of energy created by our media present us with similar possibilities of evasion of the consequences of destruction. By studying the pattern of the effects of this huge vortex of energy in which we are involved, it may be possible to program a strategy of evasion and survival.

Survival cannot be trusted to natural response or natural instinct because the brainstem is not provided with any means of responding to manmade environments. There is a passage in Anthony Storr's *The Human Aggression* in which he observes that it is obviously true that most bomber pilots are no better, no worse than other men. The majority of them, given a can of petrol and told to pour it over a child of three and ignite it, would probably disobey the order. Yet put a decent man in an airplane a few hundred feet above a village, and he will kill without compunction. He will drop high explosives and napalm, inflict appalling pain and injury on men, women, and children. The distance between him and the people he's bombing make them into an impersonal target – no longer human beings like himself, with whom he can identify.

This scenario is a characteristic situation. That bomber pilot is very much like the person introducing any new technology using ordinary human business resources and existing institutional means. None of these people ever consider what will be the impact or the effect of what they do when they pull that trigger. Quite apart from the use of weaponry at a distance, there are the effects of changes in man himself which result from using his own devices to create environments of service. Any new service environment, such as that created by railways or motor cars or telegraph or radio, deeply modifies the very nature and image of the people who use them. Radical changes of identity happening in very sudden brief intervals of time have proved more deadly and destructive to human values than were wars fought with hardware weapons.

In the electric age the alteration of human identity by new service environments of information have left whole populations without personal or community values to a degree that far exceeds the effects of food, fuel, and energy shortages.

I am going to introduce a new survival approach in my forthcoming book on laws of the media, and I hope that readers will offer many improvements to this method. In the meantime, I suggest it's possible to begin by noticing in the case of any new medium or technology:

1. What does the technology amplify, enhance, or enlarge?
2. What does it obsolesce?
3. What does it retrieve or bring back from a distant past? (Probably something that was scrapped earlier.)
4. What does it flip or suddenly reverse into when pushed to its limits?

I will give you a few examples of this pattern, these four phases or stages in the development of any artifact whatever. I have in front of me, in isolation from other things, a camera. By its snapshotting it enhances aggression and private power over people. It obsolesces privacy. It retrieves the past as present; it brings back the big-game hunter. Bringing him home alive means bringing people home alive: photographic journalism is very big-game hunting. It flips into the public domain.

The clock amplifies work. Until the clock was invented, what we call work was almost impossible to organize. It obsolesces leisure. It retrieves history as art form by fixed chronology – immeasurable, sequential chronology capable of visual time as measured by the clock. It reverses when pushed all the way into the eternal present, a nowness.

Electric media in general amplify information, range, and scope, pushing information into a service environment by simultaneity. Electric media obsolesce the visual, the connected, the logical, the rational. They retrieve the subliminal, tactile, dialogue, and involvement. They reverse finally all hardware into software.