

Introduction
for week 1

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Media Unlimited

HOW THE TORRENT OF
IMAGES AND SOUNDS
OVERWHELMS OUR LIVES

2001

Bluffton College Library

A METROPOLITAN / OWL BOOK

Henry Holt and Company | New York

Introduction

Every book begins with a dissatisfaction, a hope, and a gamble. The dissatisfaction first. Truth is, I got tired of what I knew, or thought I knew, or sounded as though I knew, about media, and dissatisfied, too, with what others were writing and saying. I was trapped in a tree-forest imbalance. The more trees I identified, the less forest I saw. But the nature of the forest, the hugeness and weirdness of it, was exactly what mattered.

I have been reading and writing about media for more than twenty-five years now, from varying angles, in different moods, modes, and styles, in scholarly studies and popular magazines, coolly and not so coolly, rethinking here and there but persuaded in general that media matter greatly, that it takes effort to work out just how they matter, and that, if properly understood, they cast light on how our world works, though not necessarily as the engineers, proprietors, or users may have intended.

For me, it began with awareness of a considerable discrepancy between media images and what I was pleased (or displeased) to call reality. This discrepancy came to me as a revelation and something

of a shock. I tried to analyze, in some detail, how it happened that the world I had known in the New Left movement of the 1960s had been processed by the news industry into pictures and slogans that seemed quite different from, even contrary to, what I knew with my own senses; and how this manufactured impression, like some ghostly emanation, produced a strong and eerie impact on the movement itself. I wrote a book called *The Whole World Is Watching*, extrapolating from this episode to show and explain how the media are, in relation to social reality, fun-house mirrors, selective in their appetites, skewed in their imagery. The news is not in any simple way a "mirror" on the world; it is a conduit for ideas and symbols, an industrial product that promotes packages of ideas and ideologies, and serves, consequently, as social ballast, though at times also a harbinger of social change. The news is a cognitive warp. The world is this way; the media make it appear that way. I wanted to know why and what difference it made.

Curiosity then drew me to the entertainment industry, another apparatus that systematically produces versions of reality. I started out by wondering how Hollywood digested social turmoil into television fictions, then realized that in order to work out how political controversy got domesticated, I would have to discover how all kinds of programs got packaged, and what got left out and why. Accordingly, I spent months in Hollywood and wrote a book called *Inside Prime Time*, an analysis of the network television business, tracing the corporate and cultural forces that churn out programs.

To a hammer, they say, the whole world looks like nails. Occupationally, I had somehow become a "media sociologist" and "media critic," though my interest in media was precisely in the light they cast on a whole society and culture. Over the years, as I resisted narrowness and worked on other projects, I kept being drawn back to the subject of media and their place in the contemporary world. I followed the scholarly literature as much as a single individual can

in an age of academic overflow. I wrote dozens upon dozens of articles on media subjects: happy-talk news, Ronald Reagan and the so-called Teflon effect, sound bites and politics, the treatment of campaigns as horse races, TV's depiction of the Cold War, the Gulf War, earthquakes, and anniversaries, car commercials, MTV, *Survivor*, television's corps of pundits, its treatment of gays and African-Americans, of Internet hype and dot-com mania, moralism and politics in the movies, media violence, conglomerate mergers, college students' taste in documentary films, the export of American popular culture, O.J. Simpson, Princess Diana, Monica Lewinsky. . . . Each time, I started with a subject of some currency and hoped to see it as part of a whole field. Except: Where was that whole field?

Which brings me to a parable.

TRUCKS

A customs officer observes a truck pulling up at the border. Suspicious, he orders the driver out and searches the vehicle. He pulls off panels, bumpers, and wheel cases but finds not a single scrap of contraband, whereupon, still suspicious but at a loss to know where else to search, he waves the driver through. The next week, the same driver arrives. Again the official searches, and again finds nothing illicit. Over the years, the official tries full-body searches, X rays, and sonar, anything he can think of, and each week the same man drives up, but no mysterious cargo ever appears, and each time, reluctantly, the customs man waves the driver on.

Finally, after many years, the officer is about to retire. The driver pulls up.

"I know you're a smuggler," the customs officer says. "Don't bother denying it. But damned if I can figure out what you've been smuggling all these years. I'm leaving now. I swear to you I can do

you no harm. Won't you please tell me what you've been smuggling?"

"Trucks," the driver says.

The media have been smuggling the habit of living with the media.

The swarming enormity of American popular culture ought to be obvious, for never have so many communicated so much, on so many screens, through so many channels, absorbing so many hours of irreplaceable human attention, about communications. Whenever strangers wish to feel out common ground and establish that they are not altogether alien to one another, they compare notes on stars and shows, declare thumbs up or thumbs down, deploy the latest catch phrases, indicate that they are *West Wing*, *South Park*, Oprah, Howard Stern, World Wrestling Federation, or Rush Limbaugh types of people. In all their bits and chunks, the media are major subjects of the media themselves, glutted as they are with reviews, profiles, commentaries, gossip, trivia, and bulletins about hits and celebrities, rising and falling stars, blazing and cooling fads, trends and gadgets, the ebb and flow of executive careers in the media, the latest in media corporate acquisitions of other media corporations. Entertainment writers and talking heads are legion. The *New York Times's* weekly section "Circuits," devoted to new communications technology, has been emulated elsewhere. Claims of "media effects" are legion, and many of them, or at least their authors, circulate through television, newspaper columns, and the Internet. Organizations galore sponsor conferences galore on violence and profanity in the media. Books and journals about the media stream off the presses.

Yet for all the talk and the talk about the talk, the main truth about the media slips through our fingers. Critics and commentators look for contraband but miss the truck—the immensity of the experience of media, the sheer quantity of attention paid, the devotions

and rituals that absorb our time and resources. The obvious but hard-to-grasp truth is that living with the media is today one of the main things Americans and many other human beings do.

INFORMATION? PLEASE

The centrality of media is disguised, in part, by the prevalence of that assured, hard-edged phrase *information society*, or even more grandly, *information age*. Such terms are instant propaganda for a way of life that is also a way of progress. Who in his right mind could be against information or want to be without it? Who wouldn't want to produce, consume, and accumulate more of this useful stuff, remove obstacles to its spread, invest in it, see better variants of it spring to life? Even today's Luddites want to obtain speedier Internet access, put up more Web sites, promote more extensive listservs, publish more tracts, and otherwise diffuse more information about the dangers of high technology. *Information society* glows with a positive aura. The very term *information* points to a gift—specific and ever replenished, shining forth in the bright light of utility. Ignorance is not bliss; information is.

But we diminish the significance of media and our reliance on them in everyday life by classifying them as channels of information. Media today are occasions for and conduits of a way of life identified with rationality, technological achievement, and the quest for wealth, but also for something else entirely, something we call *fun*, *comfort*, *convenience*, or *pleasure*. We have come to care tremendously about how we feel and how readily we can change our feelings. Media are means. We aim, through media, to indulge and serve our hungers by inviting images and sounds into our lives, making them come and go with ease in a never-ending quest for stimulus and sensation. Our prevailing business is the business not of information but of satisfaction, the feeling of feelings, to which we give as much time as we

can manage, not only at home but in the car, at work, or walking down the street. We seek and sometimes find a laugh from a sitcom joke, an erotic twinge from an underwear ad, a jolt of rhythm from a radio playlist, a sensation of moving with remarkable speed through a video game. Even the quest for information includes the quest for the delight to be found in retrieving it—a quest, that is, for a feeling. Even on and after the infamous day of September 11, 2001, people turned to television not only for facts but for rituals of shared horror, grief, sympathy, reassurance, and the many forms of solidarity.

In a society that fancies itself the freest ever, spending time with communications machinery is the main use to which we have put our freedom. All human beings play, but this civilization has evolved a particular form of play: wedding fun to convenience by bathing ourselves in images and sounds. The most important thing about the communications we live among is not that they deceive (which they do); or that they broadcast a limiting ideology (which they do); or emphasize sex and violence (which they do); or convey diminished images of the good, the true, and the normal (which they do); or corrode the quality of art (which they also do); or reduce language (which they surely do)—but that with all their lies, skews, and shallow pleasures, they saturate our way of life with a promise of feeling, even if we may not know exactly how we feel about one or another batch of images except that they are *there*, streaming out of screens large and small, or bubbling in the background of life, but always coursing onward. To an unprecedented degree, the torrent of images, songs, and stories streaming has become our familiar world.

Accordingly, supersaturation is the subject of chapter 1 and the speed of the media torrent the subject of chapter 2.

THE TRUTH OF A GRAMMATICAL ERROR

Obliquely and unintentionally, we allude to the biggest truth about media with a grammatical error. We commonly speak of “the media” in the singular. Grammatical sticklers (like this writer) cringe when the media themselves or college students reared on them (or it) speak of “the media” as they might speak of “the sky”—as if there were only one. There is, however, a reason for this error other than grammatical slovenliness. Something in our experience makes us want to address media as “it.” We may be confused about whether “the media” are or “is” technologies or cultural codes—whether “television” is an electronic system for bringing images into the home, or the sum of Oprah, Dan Rather, Jerry Springer, and MTV; whether “the media” includes alternative rock or the Internet. But through all the confusion we sense something like a unity at work. The torrent is seamless: a collage of back-to-back stories, talk show banter, fragments of ads, soundtracks of musical snippets. Even as we click around, something *feels* uniform—a relentless pace, a pattern of interruption, a pressure toward unseriousness, a readiness for sensation, an anticipation of the next new thing. Whatever the diversity of texts, the media largely share a texture, even if it is maddeningly difficult to describe—real and unreal, present and absent, disposable and essential, distracting and absorbing, sensational and tedious, emotional and numbing.

This book is an attempt to get at the maddening difficulty.

WHAT THIS BOOK IS NOT ABOUT

Overwhelmed by the immensity and ubiquity of the media, we prefer to concentrate on their “effects.” Considering the vast cornucopia of

the items on offer, the cars, toys, beers, running shoes, weight reducers, muscle tighteners, and so on, do media make us value material goods more than we otherwise would? Does the shapeliness of the models promoting the cars and taco chips make us want to be thinner, more muscular, or implanted with silicone? Have the commercials for prescription drugs made us reliable customers for pharmaceutical blockbusters like Viagra and Claritin? Do the shoot-ups and gore make us more aggressive and murderous, the high-velocity vehicle chases more prone to speed and mayhem? Has the bare flesh on screen made us sex crazed? Have the pace and discontinuity of the media put deficits in our attention? Does the time we spend watching make us obese? Considering the pleasures of private immersion, have we become less sociable—indeed, less democratic?

Surely media have effects on behaviors and ideas, not so much because any single exposure is powerful but because they repeat. And repeat. And repeat. There is ample evidence that the answer to each of the questions above is, largely, yes—with the important qualification that more aggressive is not the same as more murderous. (For this link in the logical chain to be forged, guns must be freely available.) Still, as the industries that circulate images and sounds like to remind us—some things are true even if profiteers say so—they do not bind unwilling victims in their coils. We are regaled by choices. Everywhere we look, we are offered an index, an inventory, a menu, a guide. The media are not only performances but promises. We return for more. Crucially, the machines can be turned on and off; in fact, the on-off switches, mute buttons, channel changers, remote control clickers are part of their essence, part of what's so appealing about them. The programs, ads, songs, and stories exist in passing. One by one, they can be taken lightly. They are *made* to be taken lightly, to fill their moments in time but yield gracefully to their successors. The morals on offer can be endorsed, disputed, or shrugged off according to the social experience, disposition, or plain idiosyncrasy of the customers.

To put this another way: alongside specific effects, much of the time the everyday noise of media is the buzz of the inconsequential, the *just there*. This is neither the media's downside nor their saving grace. The buzz of the inconsequential is the media's essence. This pointlessness is precisely what we are, by and large, not free *not* to choose.

Then are we, as William Gass once suggested, “no more than the vanishing cross-hatch where the media intersect”? To answer in the affirmative would be to look for another wrong sort of contraband. We have not vanished, and we are not helpless. Everyone struggles to cope, devising commonplace stratagems to tame the onrush. These stratagems—becoming fans, critics, paranoids, exhibitionists, ironists, jammers, secessionists, and abolitionists—are the subject of chapter 3. They help us navigate, but they are also means by which we evade the immense facts of saturation and speed. Collectively, the main “effect” of media saturation is that we live—we have no other choice—in societies whose people while away countless hours watching television, listening to recorded music, playing video games, connecting to the Internet, and so on unto the next wave of technologies.

Moreover, the “we” who live in the torrent are not only Americans. The saturation is increasingly global, though not irresistibly so. The United States is the world capital of tinsel and celebrity, the homeland for the manufacture of images and soundtracks in unprecedented numbers and at unprecedented velocity. How it came to pass that American media are so exportable is the subject of chapter 4.

One caution: the swarming enormity of popular culture cannot be comprehended by calling it, in the current academic mode, *meaning-making*. Dignified as the term may sound, people do not necessarily “make meaning” from the images and sounds that they take in or sift through or that sift through them. We do not necessarily interpret (although we are more likely to do so when a researcher asks), and even when we may, under pressure, find words

to express what we like or dislike about a media moment, the interpretation or judgment is not the only or even the main thing under way. We are watching, listening, feeling. We may well be escaping from meaning. We are living a life with media, undergoing an experience that is not reducible to the celebrities or shows we "like" or "dislike." Sometimes the stuff of media does "mean" something to us, like our consumer goods, our dwellings, cars, and fashions, all the labels that serve as markers of status or badges of identity. But in any event, what happens in the process of living with media is both more and less than getting a label. It is *being with media*.

Neither are the media themselves messages—that is, statements about the world. Marshall McLuhan's glib formulation turns out to mean next to nothing. This is partly because he was not clear or convincing about just what he meant by a medium—a television set? a commercial channel? a sitcom? But McLuhan was not precise either in his use of the word *message*. Media do not simply deliver information. An image or a soundtrack is not simply a set of abstract signs that describe, point to, or represent realities standing elsewhere. Not only do they point; they *are*. They are wraparound presences with which we live much of our lives. McLuhan was closer to the truth when, in a playful mood, he titled one of his later books *The Medium Is the Massage*.

Experience is not a message, though it takes in messages. In the presence of media, we may be attentive or inattentive, aroused or deadened, but it is in symbiotic relation to them, their pictures, texts, and sounds, in the time we spend with them, the trouble we take to obtain, absorb, repel, and discuss them, that much of the world happens for us. Media are occasions for experiences—experiences that are themselves the main products, the main transactions, the main "effects" of media. This is the big story; the rest is details.

Which takes me to the gamble of this book. Instead of stringing together piecemeal analyses, arguments, complaints, and fulminations about media, I thought this was the time, at least for me, to

leave behind the more manageable questions and head toward the baffling media totality itself. The larger the ambition, of course, the chancier the book and the more conspicuous the author's limitations. I was searching for the right way to ask the reader's indulgence when I discovered that one of the great cultural historians of the twentieth century, the Dutchman Johan Huizinga, had already said what I wanted to say in the foreword to his masterwork, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture*:

The reader of these pages should not look for detailed documentation of every word. In treating of the general problems of culture one is constantly obliged to undertake predatory incursions into provinces not sufficiently explored by the raider himself. To fill in all the gaps in my knowledge beforehand was out of the question for me. I had to write now, or not at all. And I wanted to write.