

Cathy Hull

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## THE INTELLECTUAL IN VIDEOLAND

**With 25 years of commercial television under his belt, the bewildered TV viewer now confronts yet another, more radical communications revolution.**

by Douglass Cater

On a hot summer night in 1968 I was sitting in my Washington home, watching TV coverage of the disastrous Democratic convention in Chicago. Suddenly, all hell broke loose where the Wisconsin delegation was seated. TV cameras quickly zoomed in, of course, and reporters rushed to the area with walkie-talkies.

The whole nationwide TV audience thus knew in an instant what the uproar was all about. But Speaker Carl Albert, who was presiding over the convention, didn't have a clue, and he was the one who had to decide what to do about

it. There, in microcosm, one saw how our leadership can be hustled by the formidable communications system of television.

No doubt about it, television is a looming presence in American life, even though most of us hardly know what to make of the medium. It arrived so swiftly and so totally: in January 1949 only 2.3 percent of American homes had the box with the cathode-ray tube. Five years later television had penetrated more than half of our homes. Today, 97 percent of them have one or more sets—a distribution roughly matching that of indoor plumbing. With American TV approaching its quarter-century anniversary as a household phenomenon, one might think we would by now have devoted serious attention to the effects of this medium on our culture, our society, our lives. Certainly, we might expect at this point to be trying to anticipate the consequences of the even more enveloping telecommunications environment that lies ahead. Yet, as the prescient Mr. Marconi predicted a long time ago, telecommunications has become part of the "almost unnoticed working equipment of civilization."

Why unnoticed? What has prevented thinking people from applying their critical faculties to this medium, which reaches greater masses than do all the other mass media combined (the number of sets in U.S. homes is nearly double the total daily circulation of newspapers)? Why haven't more of our talented scholars been attracted to the study of this new environment? Why do the media themselves devote so little attention to serious television analysis and criticism? Why have our foundations provided only very limited resources for the study of communications, which is as fundamental to society as education, health, and the physical environment?

I WOULD SUGGEST three reasons for these failures. In the first place, scientific evidence suggests that thinking people—at least those over 25—are left-brained in development. That is, they rely mainly on the left hemisphere, which controls sequential, analytical tasks based on the use of propositional thought. But TV, we are informed, appeals mainly to the right hemisphere of the brain, which

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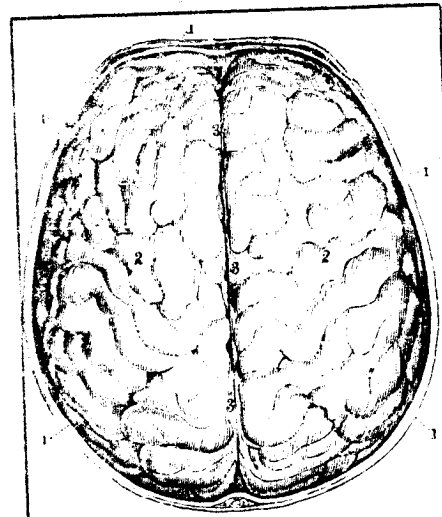
controls appositional—that is, non-sequential, non-analytic—thought.

Scientists and theologians alike have pondered how the two halves of the brain relate—whether they ignore, inhibit, cooperate, or compete with each other, or simply take turns at the control center. Whole cultures seem to show a preference for one or the other mode of thought, and thinking people of the Western world up until now have plighted their troth with propositional thought. After five centuries of slowly acquired sophistication in distinguishing the truth from the trickery transmitted by Mr. Gutenberg's invention, we now find ourselves having to master the non-linear logic created by a steady bombardment of sights and sounds on our senses. The thinking person is therefore apt to be somewhat bewildered by the telly and to regard it in the same way that a backsliding prohibitionist regards hard liquor—as something to be indulged in with a sense of guilt.

According to *Television and the Public*, Robert T. Bower's analysis of viewing habits, the "educated viewer" has learned to live with ambivalence: although he may be scornful of commercial TV fare, "he watches the set (by his own admission) as much as others during the evening and weekend hours; . . . even when he had a clear choice between an information program and some standard entertainment fare, he was just as apt as others to choose the latter."

The peculiar structure of the American television industry is a second reason why the thinking person refuses to think seriously about the medium. The broadcast industry is based on a marketplace unlike any other in our private enterprise economy. Broadcasting offers its product "free" to the consumer and depends on advertising to supply, by the latest count, gross annual revenues of \$4.5 billion. As a result, commercial TV's prime allegiance is to the merchant, not to the viewer. To attract the advertising dollar, the programmer seeks to capture the dominant portion of the viewers and to hold them unblinking for the longest period of time. Everything else is subordinated to this dogged pursuit of mankind in the mass. A program attracting many millions of viewers is deemed a failure and discarded if it happens to be scheduled opposite a program attracting even more millions.

Within this iron regime of dollars and ratings, a few ghettos of do-goodism exist. Network news and documentaries, as



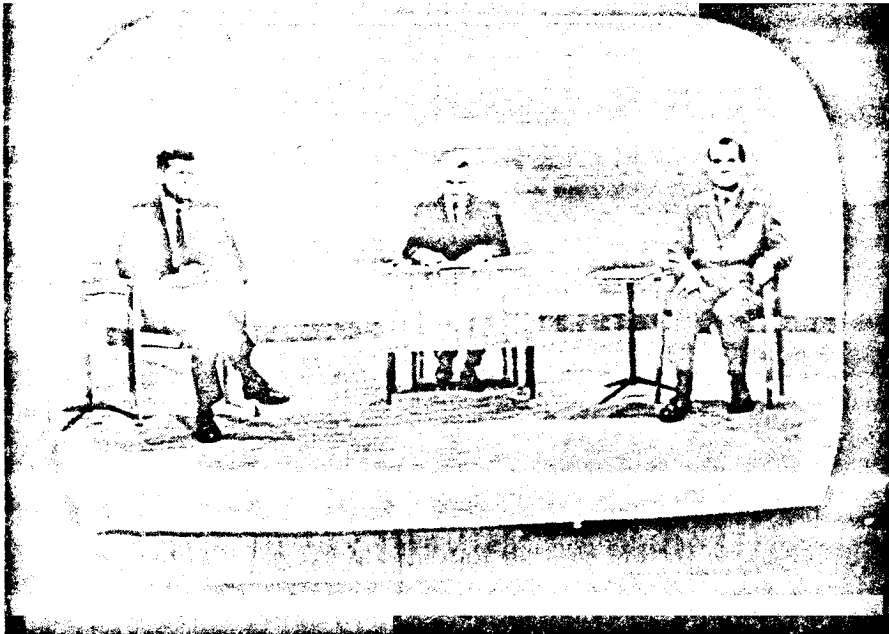
Bettmann

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well as occasional dramas of exceptional quality, reveal an upward striving in television (some cynics dismiss this as titling to the federal regulators). But these programs fail poorly in the competition for television's most precious commodity—time. A former network news chief has remarked of TV management, "They don't mind how much money and talent we devote to producing documentaries so long as we don't ask for prime-time evening hours to show them." Even the daylight hours have to be tightly rationed when the real-life marathon melodramas of Washington start competing with the soap operas of Hollywood.

Thinking people do not know how to cope with a system whose economic laws, they are led to believe, are immutable. Any suggestions they may have for the betterment of TV are characterized as naive, elitist, and offensive to the First Amendment. The proper posture is to sit back and be thankful when broadcast officialdom chooses to violate its own laws and reveal fleetingly what a fantastic instrument of communication television can be.

A third reason why thinking people have difficulty coming to grips with television is that they have yet to develop satisfactory ways to gauge the effects of this environmental phenomenon. Con-



Wide World

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sider; as an example, the Surgeon General's inquiry into the effect of televised violence on the behavior of children. Conducted over a period of three years, at a cost of \$1.8 million, and based on 23 separate laboratory and field studies, this probe was the most far-reaching to date into the social consequences of television. In its final report, the Surgeon General's committee could acknowledge only "preliminary and tentative" evidence of a causal relationship between TV violence and aggression in children.

As members of an industry dedicated to the proposition that 30-second commercials can change a viewer's buying behavior, producers would be foolish to ignore this warning about the not-so-subliminal effects of its program content. But these studies, mostly gauging immediate response to brief TV exposure, could not adequately measure the impact of the total phenomenon—the experience of the child who spends as many as six hours a day, year in and year out, before the set. This cumulative effect is what makes watching television different from reading books or going to the movies.

How TO MEASURE the longer-term, less flamboyant effects of the environment created by television? In 1938 E. B. White witnessed a TV demonstration and wrote, "A door closing, heard over the air, a face contorted, seen in a panel of light, these will emerge as the real and the true. And when we bang the door of our own cell or look into another's face,

the impression will be of mere artifice."

Now, a third of a century later, comes Tony Schwartz to carry the speculation further in his book *The Responsive Chord*. Mr. Schwartz's insights have peculiar power, because he created the ill-famed political commercial for the 1964 campaign, which showed a child innocently picking daisy petals, one after another, as a countdown for a hydrogen bomb blast. Though there was no mention of the Presidential candidate at whom the message was aimed, the effect of the commercial was so unnerving that its sponsors withdrew it after a single showing. Schwartz appears to know whereof he theorizes.

Gutenberg man, he writes, lived by a communication system requiring the laborious coding of thought into words and then the equally laborious decoding by the receiver—similar to the loading, shipping, and unloading of a railway freight car. Electronic man dispenses with this by communicating experience without the need of symbolic transformations. What the viewer's brain gets is a mosaic of myriad dots of light and vibrations of sound that are stored and recalled at high speed. Amid this electronic bombardment, Schwartz speculates, a barrier has been crossed akin to the supersonic sound barrier—or, in his image, the 90-mile-an-hour barrier beyond which a motorcycle racer must turn *in to* rather than *out with* a skid: "... In communicating at electronic speed, we no longer direct information into an audi-

ence but try to evoke stored information out of it in a patterned way."

The function of the electronic communicator, according to Schwartz, "is to achieve a state of resonance with the person receiving visual and auditory stimuli." The Gutenberg communicator—for the past 500 years patiently transmitting experience line by line, usually left to right, down the printed page—is no longer relevant. TV man has become conditioned to a total communication environment, to constant stimuli which he shares with everyone else in society and to which he is conditioned to respond instantly. Schwartz believes that the totality and instantaneousness of television, more than its program content, contributes to violence in society.

His premises lead him to the shattering conclusion that "truth is a print ethic, not a standard for ethical behavior in electronic communication." We must now be concerned not with Gutenberg-based concepts of truth, but with the effects of electronic communication: "A whole new set of questions must be asked, and a whole new theory of communications must be formulated."

Without going all the way with Schwartz, we clearly need to examine the effects of TV more diligently. What, for example, is television doing to the institutions and forms and rituals of our democracy? Politicians are still struggling to learn the grammar of TV communication and to master its body English, which is so different from that of the stump speech. TV has markedly influenced the winnowing process by which some politicians are sorted out as prospects for higher office from those who are not. TV has contributed to the abbreviation of the political dialogue and even changed the ground rules by which candidates map their campaign itineraries.

TV has encouraged the now widespread illusion that by using the medium we can create a Greek marketplace of direct democracy. When citizens can see and hear what they believe to be the actuality, why should they rely on intermediating institutions to make the decisions for them? When political leaders can directly reach their constituents without the help of a political party, why should they not opt for "the people's" mandate rather than "the party's"? Recent Presidents and Presidential candidates have been notably affected by this line of reasoning. It exposes an ancient vulnerability of our Republic, in which

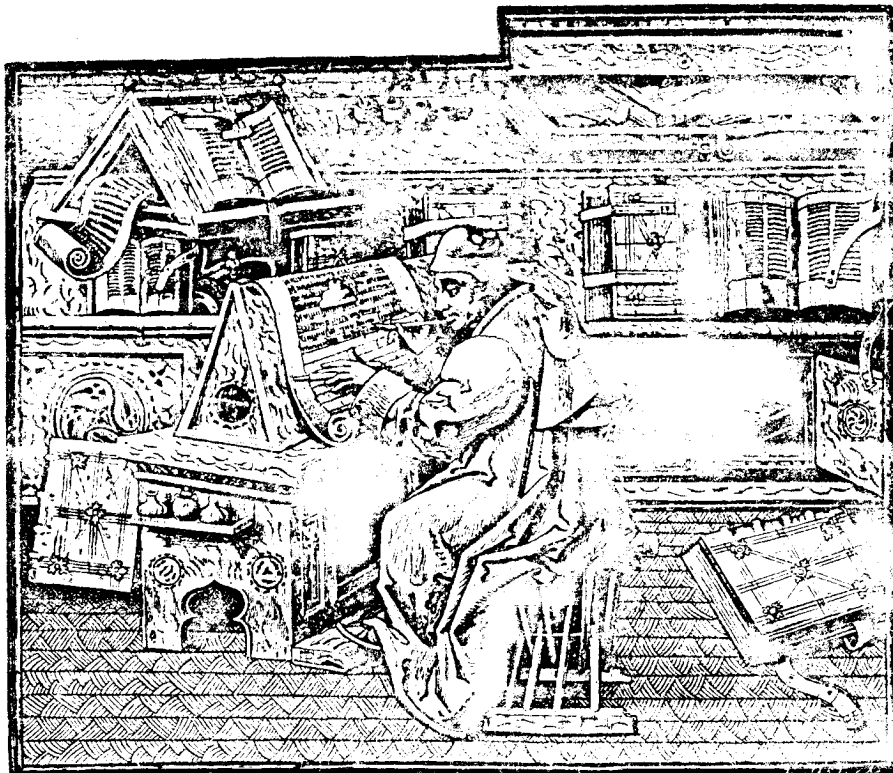
too much political lip service is paid to the notion that public opinion should rule everything.

How can democracy be strengthened within the environment of television? Why, in an age of abundant communication, has there been a continuing decline in voter participation? Prof. Michael Robinson, a political scientist, has cited surveys indicating that heavy TV viewers are more apt than light viewers to be turned off by politics. He speculates that the more dependent someone becomes on TV as his principal source of information, the more likely he is to feel that he cannot understand or affect the political process. TV, unlike newspapers, reaches many who are not interested in public affairs, and these "inadvertent" audiences, in Robinson's view, are frequently confused and alienated by what they see. Such a proposition runs directly counter to the usual reformist instinct to prescribe more programming to overcome voter apathy. Professor Robinson's speculations need to be probed more deeply.

What will be the future? George Orwell had a vision of a time—now less than a decade away—when the communications environment would be employed for the enslavement, rather than the enlightenment, of mankind. Orwell called his system "Big Brother." For the present, anyway, we can conceive of a less ominous communications future with MOTHER, which is the acronym for "Multiple Output Telecommunication Home End Resources."

What will be the technical characteristics of MOTHER? First, she will offer infinitely more channels—via microwave, satellite, cable, laser beam—than the present broadcast spectrum provides. There will also be greater capacity crammed within each channel—more information "bits" per gigahertz—so that one can simultaneously watch a program and receive a newspaper print-out on the same channel.

A life-sized MOTHER, the images on her screens giving the illusion of three-dimensionality, will be able to *narrowcast* to neighborhoods or other focused constituencies. MOTHER will be "interactive," permitting us to talk back to our television set by means of a digital device on the console. Recording and replay equipment, which is already being marketed, will liberate us from the tyranny of the broadcast schedule, and computer hookup and stop-frame control will bring the Library of Congress



Bettmann

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Tony Schwartz

and other Gutenberg treasures into our living room.

Finally, via the satellite, MOTHER will offer worldwide programming in what the communications experts artfully call "real time" (even if real time means that Muhammad Ali must fight at 4:00 A.M. in Zaire in order to suit the

prime-time needs of New Yorkers). Although MOTHER will be able to beam broadcasts from the People's Republic of China directly to a household in the United States and vice versa, she may face political barriers.

Until recently, prophets foresaw that the cable and other technological ad-



Bettmann/Springer Film Archive

From 1984

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vances would transform television from a wholesale to a retail enterprise, directly offering the consumer a genuine diversity of choice. The “television of abundance” would bring not just greater variety of programs but also new concepts of programming—continuing education, health delivery, community services. Television would become a participatory instrument of communication rather than a one-way flow.

TODAY, THESE VISIONS are not so bright. Some critics now glumly predict that the new technology will suffer the fate of the supersonic transport. Others expect that the technology will be developed, but that it will serve strictly commercial, rather than social, purposes. Computer may be talking to computer by cable and satellite, but householders will still watch “I Love Lucy” on their TV sets.

My own expectation is that the next decade or two will radically alter America’s communications. The important issue is whether the change will be for better or for worse. If it is to be for better, we must give more critical attention to TV than we have given in the past. Too much critical time has been wasted worrying about the worst of tele-

vision. More attention should be paid to the best, not simply laudatory attention but a systematic examination of style and technique and message. Criticism should also extend its reach beyond the intellectual elite into elementary and secondary schools, where children can be stimulated to think about the medium that so dominates their waking hours. We must endeavor to raise the viewers’ capacity to distinguish truth from sophistry or at least their awareness, in Tony Schwartz’s vocabulary, of the “resonance” being evoked from them.

We should have more widespread analysis and debate on the potential for new media and for new forms within the media. Could an electronic box office for pay programming repeal the iron laws governing “free” commercial television? How do we move beyond the limits of present broadcasting toward broader social purposes for television? In an era when lifelong learning has become essential for the prevention of human obsolescence, television surely has a role to play. And television might regularly deliver some types of health service now that the doctor is seldom making house calls. Health and education are gargantuan national enterprises,

which cost upward of \$200 billion annually. Yet only paltry sums are being invested for research and demonstration to develop TV’s capacity to enrich and extend these vital fields of social service.

Finally, we must move beyond our preoccupation with the production and transmission processes in media communication. An equally important question is, What gets through? The editors of *Scientific American* report that man’s visual system has more than a million channels, capable of transmitting instantly 10 million bits of information to the brain. Yet the brain has the capacity for receiving only 27 bits of information per second. These are the raw statistics of communication within the human anatomy. They lead Sir John Eccles, the Nobel Prize-winning physiologist, to believe that the most important frontier of brain research involves the study of inhibition—our capacity to censor stimuli in order to prevent overload. Sir John makes the comparison: “It’s like sculpture. What you cut away from the block of stone produces the statue.”

Our journalists, both on TV and in print, pledge fealty to the proposition that society thrives by the communication of great gobs of unvarnished truth. Our law courts make us swear to tell “the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.” Yet we only dimly understand how, in an all-enveloping informational environment, man chisels his little statues of perceived reality. As we approach a time when communication threatens to fission like the atom, we need to delve more deeply into these mysteries.

Looking far ahead, Robert Jastrow, director of the Goddard Institute of Space Studies, foresees a fifth communications revolution even more radical than the previous four revolutions of speech, writing, printing, and radio. “In the long term,” Jastrow predicts, “the new satellites will provide a nervous system for mankind, knitting the members of our species into a global society.” He compares this breakthrough with that change in the history of life several billion years ago when multicellular animals evolved out of more primitive organisms.

Before such an awesome prospect, thinking people may feel overwhelmed. Or else, we can screw up our courage, ask the fundamental questions, and make the critical choices necessary for the shaping of our destiny. □